AFTER 500 YEARS, IS THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION BEING UNDONE?

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few people can claim to have changed the world. Martin Luther is certainly one of them. In challenging some of the corrupt teachings and practices of the Roman church 500 years ago, this German priest and professor set in motion a chain of events that transformed Europe and broke the hold of the Catholic Church over the minds and hearts of the continent. The result was the Protestant Reformation, which led to millions leaving the Catholic Church to try to reform Christianity. From that small beginning sprang dozens, then hundreds, and eventually thousands of churches and denominations—each holding different beliefs, yet each claiming to be Christian.

While Luther’s attempts at changing the Catholic Church were partly successful, in the final analysis they went nowhere near far enough. By his time, in the early 1500s, the Roman church had assimilated centuries of ideas, teachings and practices from other religions, just as Roman religion had done in earlier centuries.

Catholicism had adopted as its major holidays Easter and Dec. 25—the first being a resurrection celebration of completely different gods of pagan antiquity and the latter being the birthday of the sun god, as any encyclopedia or Internet search will clearly show.

From Greek philosophy the church had taken the ideas of the immortal soul and going to heaven or hell at death. From sun-worship it appropriated Sunday, the first day of the week, as its weekly day of rest and worship. The coming Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus Christ, the apostles and the biblical prophets, was replaced with an earthly kingdom in the form of the church.

Luther, who proclaimed sola scriptura—that we should follow Scripture alone—should’ve put his words into practice and led a real reform by going back to the original teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles. Had he done so, the world would be far different!

It’s a shame that today’s Christianity largely believes itself to be the Kingdom of God on earth and has lost sight of the fact that Scripture repeatedly proclaims the Kingdom of God to be the reign of Jesus Christ over the earth at His return (see, for example, Daniel 2:44; Matthew 6:10; Revelation 11:15).

Yes, Bible prophecy tells us that Jesus will establish His Kingdom on earth, and He will begin the greatest religious reformation the world has ever seen! He will initiate “the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21, New Living Translation). Those prophets consistently proclaimed that a righteous King would restore God’s Kingdom to the earth!

At that time Jerusalem will become the international center of religion and government: “All nations shall flow to it . . . and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord . . . and we shall walk in His paths’” (Isaiah 2:2-3).

The world will be taught true, biblical Christianity, the heart of which includes faith-filled obedience to God: “‘Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them . . . and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God’” (Ezekiel 11:19-20).

At that time the world’s universal religion—true Christianity—will include observance of the religious festivals of the Bible that were kept by Jesus and His disciples. “It shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles” (Zechariah 14:16; compare Leviticus 23:34).

The biblical Sabbath, the seventh day of the week (from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown in biblical reckoning of time), will also be required of all people: “‘. . . From one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 66:23).

We hope you’ll carefully read the articles in this issue to better understand the right and truly needed religious reformation that is coming for the entire world—and how you can be a part of the greatest changes the world has ever seen!
When the Catholic monk Martin Luther challenged the Catholic Church with his Ninety-five Theses, few could've foreseen the upheaval and division that would result. Now, 500 years later, could we see a reunification of world Christianity? Does Bible prophecy give any indication?

by Peter Eddington

As a major split ever occurred in your congregation or church denomination? It’s a sad fact of life that church splits have been common throughout the 2,000 years since Jesus founded His Church.

Five centuries ago the dominant branch of the traditional Christian religion, the Roman Catholic Church, faced a serious schism as one of its priests and theologians, the now-famous Martin Luther, came to reject several teachings and practices of the church. Among the disputes, Luther strongly took issue with the Catholic view on indulgences and that freedom from God’s punishment for sin could be purchased with money.

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s Ninety-five Theses, which tradition claims was affixed to the door of the castle church of Wittenberg on Oct. 31, 1517 (though the story is a matter of dispute). The Theses launched what would become known as the Protestant Reformation. Luther was later excommunicated, his Theses rejected by Pope Leo X in 1520. This split in Christianity was the second major breakup after the Orthodox split of the 11th century.

Now, 500 years on, serious questions remain about the effectiveness of Martin Luther’s reforms and whether or not they will hold.

Is the Protestant Reformation being undone? Could the 500-year split be reversed, reuniting Catholics and Protestants?

As this huge anniversary is being commemorated, an underlying current is quietly sweeping through the Lutheran Church as the Catholic Church in Rome gathers increasing support that could eventually see Luther’s dreams undone.

Lutherans and Catholics receiving communion

As we study the modern relationship between Catholics and Lutherans, we can’t help but notice a softening of the barrier that drove these two faiths apart starting in 1517. The wedge that initially divided them is gradually being pulled out. Is the Reformation losing its identity?

On July 5, 2017, in Wittenburg, Germany—the same town where Martin Luther openly attacked church practice and teaching 500 years ago, setting in motion the Protestant Reformation—the World Communion of Reformed Churches (representing 80 million believers) agreed to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, previously agreed to in 1999 by Catholics and Lutherans, and by Methodists in 2006.


The message was read aloud to some 800 dignitaries,
representing some of the largest Christian churches, who had
gathered in Wittenberg for the event. Cardinal Brian Farrell,
secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian
Unity, told the assembled delegates that the agreement has
opened “a new era of trust between the churches—a time for
healing and reconciliation and rediscovering how much we
share” (ibid.).

This is the latest in several such moves. On Jan. 15, 2016, a
group of Finnish Lutherans were offered Holy Communion by
Catholic priests at a mass held in St. Peter’s Basilica following a
meeting with Pope Francis. Lutheran bishop Samuel Salm said
of the Communion, “I myself accepted it.” He added that “this
was not a coincidence” (“Lutherans Receive Communion at
Vatican After Meeting With Pope: Report,” LifeSiteNews.com,
Jan. 21, 2016).

In a Dec. 12, 2015, interview with the National Catholic
Register, Pastor Jens Kruse of Rome’s Evangelical Lutheran
Church said, “I think it’s typical for Pope Francis to open doors,
and now we, as churches, have the duty to find ways to fill
this open door with more of a life of ecumenism of unity”—the
term ecumenism used for efforts to unify the world’s churches
(“Revolution: Rome Lutheran Pastor Says Pope Francis ‘Opened
Door’ to Intercommunion,” LifeSiteNews.com, Dec. 16, 2015,
emphasis added throughout).

It seems that the Roman Catholic Church is quietly working
to bring back its estranged children with an aggressive
push towards ecumenism—seeking to negate 500 years of
separation. Where are such developments heading?

Could unity actually end up being something quite
dangerous? Is it possible that at some point in the future, only one official religion will be allowed and others banned?

Calling on Catholics and Lutherans worldwide

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In October 2016, Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Yunan,
21), the first major trend He warned about when foretelling the signs that would precede His return was a *counterfeit Christianity* (Matthew 24:4-5). Almost from the start, deceivers began trying to influence and infiltrate the New Testament Church.

Before long, still in the first century, several variant forms of Christianity took root—one staying faithful to the pure truth of the Bible and Christ’s teachings, and others blending the Bible with other beliefs and philosophies. This blending is called *syncretism*, and many of the popular pagan Roman beliefs that were added to Christianity actually originated with ancient Babylonian religions.

Very soon, within a few decades of Jesus founding His Church, the trends He had warned about began to come to pass. By the 50s A.D. the apostle Paul warned that false teachers were already proclaiming “another Jesus” and a different gospel” (2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6). Late in the first century some had gone so far as to reject the apostle John and were putting true Christians out of the Church (3 John 9).

**A new church arises and gains power**

Early on, this Christianity underwent drastic changes. The visible church became quite different from what was originally established by Jesus and His apostles. Historian Jesse Hurlbut calls this period “the age of shadows.” As he describes it, “For fifty years after St. Paul’s life a curtain hangs over the church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church fathers, we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul” (*The Story of the Christian Church*, 1970, p. 33).

In the fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine decided to make Christianity the official state religion to further unify and strengthen his empire. But to do this, he used his power to bring different factions together that taught a variety of concepts—many of them foreign to Jesus’ teachings. The end result was official recognition of various beliefs that were similar in many ways to the popular pagan Roman sun worship.

For example, by this time the visible majority church had adopted as its weekly day of worship the first day of the week, Sunday, honed as the day of the unconquered sun, in place of the biblical Sabbath, the seventh day of the week (from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday). Similarly, the Roman celebration of the birthday of the sun, Dec. 25, was relabeled as the supposed birthday of the Son of God and became one of the world’s most popular holidays—Christmas!

Constantine’s state-sponsored church further evolved and grew in power and became known as the Roman Catholic Church—“catholic” from the Latin word *catholicus*, meaning universal or general. It was to be the universal religion of the Roman Empire.

At times the bishop of Rome, or pope, has had such great political as well as religious authority that *he could enthrone and depose emperors*. The church controlled the state! Because of this intimate relationship between church and state, for several centuries the empire was called the Holy Roman Empire.

And so, what we see happening as the church gained power and allied itself with the state is the combined church-state persecution of other Christians—especially those who held most closely to Jesus’ original teachings. Those not part of the Roman Church became intensely tyrannized during that time.

The Roman Catholic Church also adopted a governmental structure that was strikingly similar to that of the old Roman Empire. That is why historians have remarked on the Roman Catholic Church being a mirror image of the Roman Empire (we will examine this “mirror image” more in a moment).

But, as we noted at the beginning, 500 years ago a major disruption occurred in the Roman Catholic Church when Martin Luther gave his *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517.

Will this division, this wound, be healed, as called for in the 2016 joint declaration?

Let’s go to the source. What does Bible prophecy tell us?

**To understand the future we must understand the past**

Is a mandated, one-world religion on the horizon? Does Scripture give us the answer? Will all peoples one day have to show allegiance to a future church-state empire patterned after Constantine’s?

Since the fall of the Roman Empire more than 15 centuries ago, European leaders have made a number of attempts to resurrect it. Justinian, Charlemagne, Otto the Great, Charles V, Napoleon, and Hitler along with Mussolini all tried to unite Europe as a revived Roman Empire. All succeeded to varying degrees for a time. But there will be yet another attempt.

History shows us that out of the Roman Empire came the ruling power of the Roman Catholic Church. The empire itself is described in the book of Revelation as a “beast.” And side by side with the Beast in chapter 13, the church allied with the Beast is described as “the image of the beast”—a mirror image or something that strongly resembles the original.

History also shows that this church took over the former administrative governance structure and regions of the empire. “By the fourth century, the church followed the example of the Roman Empire. Emperor Constantine organized the church into dioceses along the pattern of the Roman regional districts. (The word *diocese* was a secular term that referred to the larger administrative units of the Roman Empire.) Later, Pope Gregory shaped the ministry of the entire church after Roman law” (*Frank Viola and George Barna, Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices*, 2008, p. 119).

Thus the church became a mirror image of the original—the Roman church copied the Roman Empire. As noted historian Will Durant observed in his monumental work *The Story of Civilization*: “Christianity . . . grew by the absorption of pagan faith and ritual; it became a triumphant Church by inheriting the organizing patterns and genius of Rome . . . ”

“The Roman gift was above all a vast framework of government, which, as secular authority failed, became the structure of ecclesiastical rule. Soon the bishops, rather than the Roman prefects, would be the source of order and the seat of power in the cities; the metropolitans, or archbishops, would support, if not supplant, the provincial governors; and the synod of bishops would succeed the provincial assembly.

“The Roman Church followed in the footsteps of the Roman state; it conquered the provinces, beautified the capital, and established discipline and unity from frontier to frontier.
Rome died in giving birth to the Church; the Church matured by inheriting and accepting the responsibilities of Rome” (1944, Vol. 5, Caesar and Christ, pp. 575, 618-619).

A coming church-state combined power

Bible prophecy shows we will see yet another end-time attempt at a great church-state solution to humankind’s problems—but one which will be relatively short-lived.

The apostle John in a divinely revealed vision described what he saw, the imagery symbolizing an end-time church-state power: “And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name. Now the beast [a final end-time global superpower] which I saw was like a leopard,

his feet were like the feet of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. The dragon [the devil] gave him his power, his throne, and great authority” (Revelation 13:1-2).

What do we see right away from these two verses?

• This Beast is blasphemous—not of God.
• This Beast acts like a wild animal, not with human kindness—like a wild leopard, bear or lion.
• This Beast receives its power from the devil (and the devil is even worshipped—verse 4).

Who is like the Beast?

We know that this future empire is a governmental system of major proportions because it’s supported by a powerful military: “So they worshiped the dragon [the devil] who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?’” (verse 4).

How long will this blasphemous Beast rule in its full power? “And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months” (verse 5). So, for 3½ years this Beast will be the dominant power over much of our planet. (This also appears to be a dual prophecy, with lengthy dominances by this power during the Middle Ages as a precursor to the end-time fulfillment.)

And then some very disturbing prophetic words are written for us to contemplate: “It was granted to him [the Beast] to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation” (verse 7). What we see here are the true people of God, those who believe differently from the established religion, being persecuted for their biblical beliefs!

It will become the “law” to obey this dragon-appointed Beast. In fact, Revelation points out that everyone will worship the Beast except those who have been written into the Book of Life of Jesus Christ: “All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (verse 8).

What do we see in summary from these six verses?

• This Beast will have the world’s most powerful military forces.
• This Beast is given power and authority to rule for 3½ years.
• This Beast savagely persecutes the true saints of God.
• This Beast forces everyone to submit and obey.

The religious partner with the Beast

And now the apostle John gives us a window into the religious power, the great church, behind the governmental Beast: “Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed” (verses 11-12).

The message proclaimed by this second beast (which is a mirror image of the first Beast, verse 15), is once again from the dragon—the devil himself—and all of humanity is required to worship likewise. This is a great revival of the Roman Church, partnering with the first Beast into a global church-state empire! Revelation 19 also calls the leader of this second beast—this Roman church—the False Prophet.

Note that this is a very convincing religious system. Humanity will be deceived. Will you also be led astray?

This second beast performs amazing, compelling miracles that are sure to bring multitudes on board! “He performs great
signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on
the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell
on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the
sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make
an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and
lived” (verses 13-14).

The first Beast uses its military power and governmental
authority to enforce a global religion on humanity: “He [the
first beast] was granted power to give breath to the image of
the beast [the second beast, the Roman church], that the image
of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not
worship the image of the beast to be killed” (verse 15). See, this
is a matter of life or death!

And then the apostle John talks about the infamous “mark
of the Beast”: “He causes all, both small and great, rich and
poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on
their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who
has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his
name . . . Let him who has understanding calculate the number
of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is six
hundred and sixty-six” (verses 16-18).

What do we see in summary from these eight verses? It’s
quite sobering:

• The first Beast is joined by a second, religious beast, also
called the False Prophet.
• This second beast also speaks like the devil.
• This second beast is a mirror image of the first and forces
everyone to worship the first beast.
• This second beast performs convincing miracles that will
deceive all of humanity—except the true saints of God.
• The first and second Beasts unite in a church-state power
that will enforce a global religion in areas under its control.
• The penalty for those who do not submit to this religion
will be death.

Yes, this religion will be enforced. Other faiths and beliefs
will be outlawed—including the true Church of God and its
biblically held beliefs. Remember, those holding true biblical
beliefs were systematically persecuted and exterminated by
emperors such as Constantine in the early centuries after Jesus’
resurrection, as well as later when church and state were again
combined.

Definitely an end-time scenario

Some students of Bible prophecy will claim that these events
have already been completely fulfilled or that they are just
allegories. But no, Revelation 17 shows these events happening
just prior to the return of Jesus Christ as King of Kings. Jesus
will return to save humanity from imminent, total destruction
(Matthew 24:21-22).

“The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have
received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one
hour as kings with the beast. These are of one mind, and they
will give their power and authority to the beast. These will
make war with the Lamb [Jesus Christ], and the Lamb will
overcome them, for He is Lord of Lords and King of kings; and
those who are with Him [the true saints] are called, chosen,
and faithful” (Revelation 17:12-14).

The words clearly show that this joining together of 10
“kings” (leaders of nations or groups of nations) who give
their sovereignty to a single individual (who is also called “the
Beast”) is yet future, part of the world-changing geopolitical
events to take place just before Jesus Christ’s return.

Prophecy shows us that for a short time a single global
religion will be enforced on humanity in the time of the end by
the Beast. This Beast will be a combined church-state system
that has its roots in the old Holy Roman Empire.

It’s not a coincidence that the Roman Catholic Church
is working on bringing back its departed children with an
aggressive push towards ecumenism designed to negate 500
years of estrangement that began with Martin Luther. Yes, the
Protestant Reformation that split the world’s Christianity will
eventually end in some kind of reunification. Bible prophecy
says so!

What about you? Love the truth!

There is a great warning for you and me in these prophecies.
The Bible warns in many other places of this great apostasy
of the end time. There is coming a huge end-time appeal to
deceive the vast majority of humanity.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Thessalonika,
speaking about the return of Jesus Christ to the earth, “Let
no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come
unless the falling away comes first” (2 Thessalonians 2:3). He
then proceeds to explain this “falling away” in greater detail,
Paul talking here about “the man of sin.”

This end-time “man of sin” is going to style himself as
greater than God, pretending or even claiming to be God—and
people will believe him. Why? “Because they did not receive
the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason
God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe
the lie” (2 Thessalonians 2:9-11).

Revelation 19:20 describes this powerful religious leader as
the False Prophet, working with the political leader called the
Beast. Daniel 7 even says that the pompous religious figure
in union with state power “persecutes the saints of the Most
High, and shall intend to change times and law” (verse 25).
That’s exactly what Roman Emperor Constantine did, and
what church leaders have done ever since!

The end-time deception will be both powerful and great!
Knowing that his rule over earth is nearing its end, Satan the
devil will mount an end-time appeal to deceive people—even
the people of God, who will fall prey if they do not love the truth. So
you and I are warned! Keep the commandments. Love the truth.
You and I must stay pure in a society that mixes truth and
error—that encourages religious syncretism. How easy it is
to be sucked in at different levels by persuasive arguments
and soon even persuasive miracles that appeal to our human
nature. Don’t believe the lie. Love the truth! 

LEARN MORE
What do the mysterious prophecies of the book of Revelation
mean? How will they impact your life? What does God expect
you to do in light of them? Be sure to download or request
our study guide The Book of Revelation Unveiled. Your free
copy is waiting for you!

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According to popular tradition, it was on Oct. 31, 1517, that a relatively unknown Catholic monk named Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the front door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Luther intended his work, written in Latin, to be read by priests and monks. The Ninety-five Theses concerned changes he felt were needed in the Catholic Church. Within a short time Luther’s Theses were translated into German, and a number of clergy and lay people began to agree with him.

Little did he know that this simple act would spark a revolution that would break the Catholic Church’s power over the spiritual life of Europe. Within a few years Western Christianity would split into competing branches. The world would never be the same.

Medieval fear of hell and purgatory

At the core of theological thought in the Middle Ages was the absolute terror of going to hell. Salvation was introduced to humanity through Jesus Christ, but pious people were plagued by the question of what would happen to them if in this life they weren’t totally cleansed from sin?

To die while still in “mortal sin” was terrifying. If a priest wasn’t present to perform the last rites a person could end up being eternally tormented by demons.

And then there was the problem of venial sin—sins not warranting eternal damnation but requiring punishment. To deal with this problem the medieval church became obsessed with the concept of purgatory.

Purgatory, the church taught, was where Christians would go after death. It wasn’t hell, where the eternally damned had no hope of escape, but it was a place of unthinkable anguish where the souls of Christians faced punishment and purification. You can imagine the anxiety experienced by pious medieval Catholics obsessed with thoughts of loved ones bound in a torturous existence waiting to be freed to join Jesus and the saints in heaven.

The Catholic Church taught there was something the living could do. In Luther’s day the Wittenberg church had numerous side altars where priests performed private mass. People paid for these sacraments as a means to lessen the time their loved ones had to spend in purgatory.

Other practices included the selling of “indulgences.” An indulgence was a promise by the church that when a person paid a sum of money to the church, he could reduce the amount of time a loved one spent in purgatory. A person could even buy an indulgence for himself—a kind of spiritual debit card.
Luther struggled with the concept of sin and how a person could be accepted by God. Eventually he became plagued with doubts about the teachings of his church.

Paying for masses and selling of indulgences had made the Roman Catholic Church extremely wealthy. One of the issues Luther attacked in his Theses was the sale of indulgences. The result was that the entire economy of the Catholic Church, the way the Vatican financed building projects and maintained military power, was under attack.

**An unknown monk on a collision course with the pope**

In his earlier years Luther had no intention of joining the clergy, but a dramatic event changed the course of his life. As a young man he was almost struck by lightning. At the time, most people believed that lightning was caused by the devil or demons. The idea that he could suddenly die without receiving the sacrament of last rites was terrifying. In Luther’s mind his soul could be lost forever.

Luther joined a monastery where he took a vow of chastity and poverty, received a doctorate in theology and was ordained a priest. His days were filled with prayer, ceremonies, self-denial and religious studies. But he struggled with the concept of sin and how a person could be accepted by God. He was wracked with guilt, depression and a sense of self-loathing. He concluded that God would forgive only a sinner who was consumed with self-hatred.

In 1511 Luther traveled to Rome. It wasn’t long before the idealistic monk began to experience grave disappointment. He was shocked by how priests hurried through one mass so they could get paid for the next one. He grew disillusioned with the opulence and immorality he witnessed among the priesthood.

There was a staircase in Rome reported to be the very steps Jesus climbed to appear before Pontius Pilate. Luther wanted to help his grandfather spend less time in purgatory, so he paid an indulgence and climbed the steps on his knees, stopping on each step to kiss it and say a prayer. Later he would say that when he reached the top of the steps he wondered if anything in this ritual was true.

The monk, who thought the way to God was through self-hatred and rituals, was now plagued with doubts about the teachings of his church. And this led to his changed beliefs.

After his Theses, Luther, a prodigious writer, produced books that became popular, and Rome began to take notice. One that especially drew notice was titled *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, published in 1520. In this work Luther claimed that the papacy was antichrist.

The pope condemned Luther’s writings and commanded that his books be burned. Luther responded by publicly burning the pope’s decree. The next year Luther was called before the German emperor and at the Diet of Worms was condemned as a heretic. The unknown monk was now famous.

**More revolutionary acts**

The outlaw monk fled to the Wartburg castle. It was here, between 1521 and 1522, that Luther translated the New Testament from Greek into German.

In our world of books and instant Internet access to information, it’s difficult to understand just how monumental it was for Luther to complete this translation. For more than a thousand years the Catholic Church had maintained ecclesiastical power by making sure the Bible was not translated into common languages. The study of the Bible was mainly reserved for monks and priests either in Latin or the original languages of Hebrew and Greek. Even the regular mass, the everyday worship service centered on the Eucharist or communion rite, was said in Latin. This meant that most people throughout Christendom didn’t even understand the words of the mass.

Through the relatively new technology of printing, Luther’s supporters published many copies of the New Testament. It was now possible for literate people throughout Germany to obtain a copy of the Scriptures in their own language.

The next year Luther did something else that shocked the Catholic world. In spite of his priestly vow of celibacy, Luther married. And he didn’t just marry a common local girl—he married a former nun!

**Luther’s disagreement with the book of James**

Luther’s most lasting legacy is his teaching that justification, being made right before a righteous God, is through faith alone.

One passage that was foundational to his teaching is Romans 3:23–26, where the apostle Paul writes: “… For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Here Paul presents the good news that our sins are forgiven because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins as our substitute. Since no human works can earn God’s forgive-
ness, then we are justified when we have faith in God’s promise and embrace Christ’s sacrifice for us.

Luther concluded that to be justified, all one has to do is believe in Christ without any corresponding works. He pointed to Paul’s writings in Romans where God promised Abraham descendants in number like the stars in heaven even though Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless and beyond child-bearing years. Luther noted that Paul quoted from a passage in Genesis stating, “And he [Abraham] believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6; quoted in Romans 4:3).

For Luther this was an open-and-shut case: Believe and you are justified. Once justified you are saved. Once you are saved, you remain saved without any influence of works—good or bad.

But Luther had a problem. The New Testament book of James teaches that more is needed for justification than mere belief. James, the half brother of Jesus Christ, wrote: “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? And if a person truly trusts God, then his actions will be rooted in that trust.

Think about James’ argument. Abraham believed God’s promise that his son Isaac would give him descendants. Then God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. God’s promise and command for obedience seemed inconsistent to say the least. What if Abraham would have said to God: “I believe your promise to give me descendants through Isaac, and since that can’t happen if I sacrifice him, I have decided to disobey you. But I still believe in your promise!”

James argued that if Abraham had refused to obey God, his belief would not have been real faith. If a person truly trusts God, then his actions will be rooted in that trust. We can’t erase our own sins or impress God enough to earn salvation. We must also not fall into the trap of thinking that belief is all God requires. Faith must submit to God’s working in us. In this submission, real living faith produces works. Paul is correct in teaching that human beings can’t earn justification but must have faith in Christ. James is also correct in teaching that faith without works is dead—useless and empty because it doesn’t really change the person.

Moreover, Paul himself said that “the doers of the law will be justified” (Romans 2:13)—that is, made right before God. We must understand that we receive initial justification from God whenever we repent, apart from any deeds of obedience (Romans 3:28). But remaining justified before God is conditioned upon continuing to actively obey Him. There is no contradiction.

### The revolution’s unforeseen results

It seems that after marrying, Luther thought he could finally settle down to pastoring and enjoying family life. But...
Martin Luther’s Hatred of Jews

Martin Luther was a complicated man. His writings against those whom he considered enemies of the gospel are filled with spiteful statements. He often wrote that those who opposed him were speaking for the devil himself. And one book he wrote had particularly horrific impact on history—both at the time and centuries later.

Early in his career Luther encouraged Christians to be friendly to Jews. He believed that they were in need of hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. He even wrote a book titled *Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*.

He thought that once the falsehoods of Roman Catholicism were stripped away, and the Jews were shown that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures, they would obviously see the light, convert and join the reformed church (despite centuries of persecution in the name of Christ). When they didn’t convert as he expected, Luther attacked their religion with a call to violent action.

Luther’s attack on Jews was not because of their race. The book he wrote against them was titled *The Jews and Their Lies*. His attack was because of what he saw as their denial of Christ. He viewed them as blasphemers and a threat to Christianity. The only way to deal with this threat, he argued, was to remove them from Germany.

In his book he promoted the violent burning down of Jewish synagogues and schools and argued that Jewish writings should be taken away from them. Rabbis were to be forbidden to teach. And he encouraged Christians to drive Jews from Christian neighborhoods.

Luther’s reprehensible anti-Semitism was in no way justified or biblical. His desire to eradicate Jews from Germany would be picked up by the Nazis centuries later as part of their propaganda leading to horrendous crimes against humanity, including genocide.

Following are some shameful statements from his book *The Jews and Their Lies*:

"... Eject them forever from this country. For, as we have heard, God’s anger with them is so intense that gentle mercy will only tend to make them worse and worse, while sharp mercy will reform them but little. Therefore, in any case, away with them!"

"... Dear princes and lords, those of you who have Jews under your rule—if my counsel does not please you, find better advice, so that you and we all can rid of the unbearable, devilish burden of the Jews... Do not grant them protection, safe-conduct, or communion with us..."

"Thus we cannot extinguish the unquenchable fire of divine wrath, of which the prophets speak, nor can we convert the Jews. With prayer and the fear of God we must practice a sharp mercy to see whether we might save at least a few from the glowing flames."

“My advice, as I said earlier, is: First, that their synagogues be burned down, and that all who are able toss in sulphur and pitch; it would be good if someone could also throw in some hellfire. That would demonstrate to God our serious resolve and be evidence to all the world that it was in ignorance that we tolerated such houses, in which the Jews have reviled God, our dear Creator and Father, and his Son most shamefully up till now but that we have now given them their due reward."

"I wish and I ask that our rulers who have Jewish subjects exercise a sharp mercy toward these wretched people, as suggested above, to see whether this might not help (though it is doubtful). They must act like a good physician who, when gangrene has set in, proceeds without mercy to cut, saw, and burn flesh, veins, bone, and marrow. Such a procedure must also be followed in this instance. Burn down their synagogues, forbid all that I enumerated earlier, force them to work, and deal harshly with them... It would be wrong to be merciful and confirm them in their conduct. If this does not help we must drive them out like mad dogs, so that we do not become partakers of their abominable blasphemy and all their other vices and thus merit God’s wrath and be damned with them."

(From Luther’s *Works*, E.T. Bachmann, ed.,1971, vol. 47, pp. 268-293. Read more in “Luther Followed Early Catholic Anti-Semitism” on page 17.)
his break with Rome had other serious consequences.

More Protestants began to stand up to the Catholic Church. While most shared many of Luther’s biblical interpretations, they also disagreed on a number of important subjects. Issues like infant baptism, predestination, the state of the dead and free will would bring heated debate among the reformers as the movement spread across Europe and fractured into different groups.

The leading reformer would spend his last years not only defending himself against Rome, but attacking other Protestants with the same vigor he used against the Catholics.

The movement he started led to more than a century of unrest and conflict between Catholics and Protestants—and the deaths of millions from warfare, massacres, genocide, famine and disease, all perpetrated in the name of God.

The unfinished revolution

Martin Luther exposed the avarice, ritualistic enslavement of the common person, and some of the unbiblical dogmas of Catholicism. He stood up to a religious system that had misinterpreted and misused Scripture. It was an awakening that unleashed the Protestant Reformation.

But is the movement he inadvertently spawned that much better? Five centuries after Luther presented the Ninety-five Theses, it’s time for Protestants to examine if their teachings have degenerated into a watered-down and corrupted version of what the Bible actually teaches. Has the idea that belief is all that’s needed for salvation led many to use God’s grace as a license to sin?

How many times do Christians excuse living with a boyfriend or girlfriend out of wedlock, disregarding one of the Ten Commandments, or living a lifestyle like unbelievers with the simple argument, “I’m justified without works; I’m saved by grace; God loves me just the way I am”?

This way of thinking is nothing more than using God’s grace as a license to sin. It has serious consequences. Jesus gives this warning in the Sermon on the Mount:

“No one who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Paul and James aren’t contradicting each other in their statements about faith and works. When combining the teachings of these inspired writers, we see that living faith is much more than simple belief. It is the complete and total surrender of the will and body, heart and mind, thoughts and works to the sovereignty of God and His power in us.

When a person surrenders his will to God, and in faith accepts Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Master, then God will empower Him to do good works. And the person must do so, “striving against sin” (Hebrews 12:4), to continue in justification with God. If he sins, he must repent anew in trusting faith and genuine commitment.

Salvation is more than God’s forgiveness. Salvation is God’s work in human beings to create eternal children. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6:18, “I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” We participate in His work as we faithfully submit to His working in us.

The world desperately needs a spiritual awakening. We need to return to the Bible as the guiding Word of God. Pick up the book and prayerfully ask for God’s guidance. Let the spiritual revolution begin with you!

LEARN MORE

Martin Luther exposed some of the corruption and doctrinal error of Catholicism. But he taught his own fair share of error, too, and it continued in most Protestant churches that were born out of the Reformation. Neither set of doctrines reflected the true religion and Church founded by Jesus Christ. Download or request our free study guide The Church Jesus Built to learn more!

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When Martin Luther broke with Roman Catholic teaching and practice 500 years ago, one of his main areas of disagreement was the church’s selling of “indulgences”—donations to the church for which the person or his or her loved ones would have their time in purgatory reduced. (For more on indulgences and the unbiblical concept of purgatory, see “Martin Luther: The Unfinished Reformation” beginning on page 9.)

In reaction to this practice and the corrupting influence it had on the church, Luther proclaimed that salvation was a matter of “faith alone”—that one’s actions or “works” had nothing to do with it. This premise became a foundation for Protestant doctrine ever since, and most Protestant denominations accept this basic view in some form or another.

Salvation is God’s gift

Just to be clear, Scripture tells us that eternal life is God’s gift, not something any of us deserve or can in any way earn. But the key question we need to ask is this: Is faith alone, or belief alone, really all that is required for salvation? Or does God set conditions for us to receive His priceless gift? It’s vitally important to your relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ and to your future that you understand!

The Bible indeed shows that God does set certain conditions for receiving salvation. Meeting these conditions will enable us to receive that gift, while disregarding and failing to meet the conditions will disqualify us from receiving the gift. What are these conditions?

At some point in your life you may have seen religious tracts quoting Romans 10:9: “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” Or maybe they quoted Acts 16:31: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”

Or perhaps they cited probably the single most-quoted verse of the Bible, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” From these verses millions of people believe that all they must do is believe in Jesus Christ and their salvation is assured.

Do this, the tracts tell us, and we have the promise of eternal life. But is this all there is to it? Is faith or belief all that God requires of us for salvation? Some assume these few passages are the final word on the subject. But is that true?

If you’ve studied your Bible much at all, you probably realize that we must look at a number of verses scattered throughout Scripture to get the whole picture. We must look at all the Bible says on the subject to come to a proper understanding. And few things could be more important than understanding what we must do—or not do—if we are to receive God’s gift of eternal life.

Belief is a clear requirement—but is there more?

Certainly belief in God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son, as They are described in Scripture, is crucial. Hebrews 11:6 tells us, “Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” So belief in God and having living, active faith in Him is vital to pleasing God and receiving His gift of salvation.

And again, salvation to eternal life is God’s gift by grace—His loving favor and acceptance toward us—as Ephesians 2:8-9 explains: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Salvation is God’s gift, unearned and undeserved on our part. No one will ever be able to boast that he or she has earned or deserves the gift of eternal life.

But it doesn’t stop at simple belief and grace. Can we do things—or not do things—that disqualify us from receiving that wonderful gift from God? The answer is crucial to your relationship with God and to your future!

The fact is, as noted earlier, the Bible shows that God sets certain conditions for receiving salvation. Meeting these conditions will enable us to receive that gift, while...
The Bible shows that God sets certain conditions for receiving salvation. Meeting these conditions will enable us to receive that gift, while failing to meet them will disqualify us from receiving it.

Can gifts have conditions?

Since salvation is God’s gift, what does this passage mean when it speaks of “eternal salvation to all who obey Him”? If we must do something to receive God’s gift of salvation, how can it be a gift?

To use an analogy, if someone offered to send you $100 if you would send him a self-addressed stamped envelope, he would be offering you a gift. Simply believing that he would send you the money would not actually get you the money. And if you failed to send the envelope, you likewise would not receive the money. You might complain, but you still would not receive the gift because you had not met the conditions.

On the other hand, if you sent the required envelope and received the $100, this does not mean you earned the gift. You simply met the necessary conditions. Without the offer of the undeserved gift, you could’ve sent hundreds of envelopes and received nothing, as you would have been entitled to nothing. The fact that conditions are attached to receiving a gift makes it no less a gift. Millions of people fail to understand this simple fact.

What must we do?

Since Jesus is the author of our salvation, let’s examine a few of His statements that tell us what we must do to receive that gift of salvation—eternal life with Him.

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” Here Jesus clearly states that merely acknowledging Him as Lord and Master—saying “Lord, Lord”—is not sufficient. To inherit the Kingdom of God, we must do something. We must do the will of the Father, as Jesus clearly stated.

Jesus wants us to understand that there is more to receiving eternal life than just belief or mental acceptance. Our conviction that He is our Savior must be more than just a warm, comforting thought or intellectual concept. Jesus warns that simply calling on His name or recognizing Him as “Lord” is not enough.

At one point a wealthy young man asked Jesus how he could receive eternal life: “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16), Christ’s reply, in Matthew 19:17, might shock some who think obedience to God’s law is unnecessary—that He has done that for us so we don’t have to do anything. Jesus responded, “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” Jesus didn’t answer that nothing is required other than believing in God or in Him. He told the young man he must obey the commandments of God to receive the gift of eternal life. How plain! Then, when asked which commandments, Jesus quoted from several of the Ten Commandments and another summary commandment from the Old Testament Scriptures.

As the apostle James (the half brother of Jesus Christ) points out, belief is pointless unless it is backed up by action and obedience: “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble” (James 2:19). If we think that belief is all we need for salvation, we are sorely mistaken! As James tells us, the demonic spirits fully believe in the existence of the one true God. They further know that Jesus is the Son of God raised from the dead. But the demons’ believing in these facts doesn’t mean they are saved!

James goes on to explain that faith—belief and trust in God—and obedience go hand in hand: “But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?” (James 2:20-22).

James’ point here is that works of obedience as a result of our faith maintain our relationship with God and lead to greater faith and obedience, as God requires. Without works as evidence of our faith, our faith is dead—worthless and useless.

Regrettably, Martin Luther failed to understand these biblical truths, dismissing the book of James as “an epistle of straw” that didn’t really belong in the Bible.
Baptism and the laying on of hands

Are there other conditions one must meet for receiving God’s gift of eternal life? Notice what Jesus stated in Mark 16:16: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”

Water baptism—meaning full immersion—is a symbolic act representing the death and washing away of our old sinful self and the beginning of a new life of serving God and striving to avoid sin (Romans 6:1-23). Through this act we symbolically put to death and bury the old person with his or her sins and rise from that watery grave to a new life as a new person.

Baptism is to be followed by the laying on of hands by a true minister of Jesus Christ, which allows us to receive God’s Holy Spirit and truly belong to Him (Acts 8:17; Romans 8:9). Unless we surrender our lives to God through baptism and the laying on of hands to receive His Spirit as instructed, we fail to meet—whether knowingly or unknowingly—this important requirement for receiving His gift of salvation.

The apostle Peter also affirmed these conditions for receiving God’s Spirit, declaring, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [forgiveness] of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Repentance means to turn from disobedience to God to obeying Him. So again, committed obedience and baptism are shown to be requirements in the salvation process.

To those who would brush aside these and other plain biblical instructions Jesus replies, “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). All too many rationalize around what Scripture plainly says—and in so doing do exactly what Jesus here warned against!

In Matthew 10:22 and Matthew 24:13 Jesus gave another condition we must meet to receive God’s gift of salvation: “He who endures to the end will be saved.” Some believe in the unbiblical teaching known as “eternal security” or “once saved, always saved.” But as Jesus plainly and directly implied here, we can lose out on salvation if we fail to endure to the end.

Once we have committed ourselves to obeying God and surrendering ourselves to Him, we must stay the course to the end and not look back (Luke 9:62). Even the apostle Paul realized that he needed to discipline himself to be in total subjection to God—“lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27). He clearly understood that through neglect he could lose out on God’s gift of salvation! (compare Hebrews 2:1-3). (See the Question & Answer on page 37 for more about this.)

Salvation is free, but not cheap

You may have heard the expression, “Salvation is free, but not cheap.” God’s gift of life to us cost Jesus Christ His life. He, the very Son of God, willingly surrendered His life so that we might receive God’s wonderful gift of eternal life. And it cost the Father, who “gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

But God expects us to surrender our lives in return, as Jesus states in Luke 14:26-27: “If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And you cannot be my disciple if you do not carry your own cross and follow me” (New Living Translation 1996).

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Luther Followed Early Catholic Anti-Semitism

The erroneous teachings of the Catholic church weren’t the only factors that influenced Martin Luther’s theology. He rightly condemned the church’s corruption and the false teachings that fed it, and this was a major factor in his belief that we are saved by our faith or belief alone—that obedience to God isn’t a requirement.

But another factor fed into Martin Luther’s views, and that was his virulent anti-Semitism. In the early days of the Reformation, he believed that, once he had purified the church of its corruption and doctrinal error, Jews would now recognize the truth and flock to the new, improved church. When they didn’t convert as he expected, he turned on them in bitterness and anger.

Luther’s attitude toward Jews is summed up in the title of one of his books—The Jews and Their Lies. Following are some excerpts:

“I have published this little book, so that I might be found among those who opposed such poisonous activities of the Jews who warned the Christians to be on their guard against them.”

“Now just behold these miserable, blind, and senseless people... their blindness and arrogance are as solid as an iron mountain.”

“Therefore be on your guard against the Jews, knowing that wherever they have their synagogues, nothing is found but a den of devils in which sheer selfglory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced most maliciously...”

“Moreover, they are nothing but thieves and robbers who daily eat no morsel and wear no thread of clothing which they have not stolen and pilfered from us... Thus they live from day to day, together with wife and child, by theft and robbery...”

“What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming. If we do, we become sharers in their lies, cursing and blasphemy.”

“I shall give you my sincere advice: First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians.”

“... I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues.”

“... I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.”

“... I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb.”

“My essay, I hope, will furnish a Christian... to become the foe of the Jews’ malice, lying, and cursing, and to understand not only that their belief is false but that they are surely possessed by all devils.”

(From Luther’s Works, E.T. Bachmann, ed.,1971, vol. 47, pp. 268-293. Read more in Martin Luther’s Hatred of Jews on page 12.)

In all this Luther was following in the footsteps of an earlier anti-Semite—Constantine the Great, the Roman emperor who had legalized Christianity in A.D. 313 and used it as a tool to help unite his empire. But the version of Christianity Constantine approved was itself deeply anti-Semitic, having rejected the Jewish roots of a Church whose founder and 12 apostles were all Jewish.

In declaring to be heretics those who refused to follow the Roman church in its celebration of Easter instead of the biblical Passover observed by Jesus Christ, the apostles and the early Church, Constantine wrote: “It appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast [Easter] we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul... Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd: for we have received from our Savior a different way...”

“Strive and pray continually that the purity of your soul may not seem in anything to be sullied by fellowship with the custom of these most wicked men... All should unite in desiring that which sound reason appears to demand, avoiding all participation in the perjured conduct of the Jews” (as recorded by Eusebius, Life of Constantine 3, 18-19, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1979, second series, Vol. 1, pp. 524-525).

 Sadly, both the Catholic and Protestant versions of Christianity have rejected many of the original beliefs and practices of the early Church, labeling them “Jewish” (see “What Did the Early Church Believe and Practice?” on page 21). The beliefs and practices of what is called Christianity today are far different from those of the early Church. To learn more, download or request our free study guides The Church Jesus Built, Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest, Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe? and Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?

Father must be more important to us than any other relationship. Each of us must be willing to bear his “cross,” to faithfully follow Jesus even through life’s most difficult challenges. Luke 14:28-33 carries on that thought, warning us to consider carefully that accepting the gift of eternal life comes at the highest cost we can imagine. “So no one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me” (verse 33, NLT, 1996). As Jesus Christ gave His life for us, we must be willing to give our lives to follow Him!

So returning to the title of this article, is faith alone all that’s required for God’s gift of salvation? Clearly the answer is no. His Word spells out certain conditions for us. Let us be sure, as Hebrews 2:3 exhorts us, that we not “neglect so great a salvation”!

LEARN MORE
What does God desire and expect from those to whom He would give His gift of salvation? To better understand this commitment and the wonderful rewards it brings, download or request our free Bible study guide Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.
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Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th-century Danish writer and religious philosopher, wrote that the “Christianity of the New Testament simply does not exist.” He questioned how popular Christianity had strayed so far from the way of life described and practiced in the Bible.

This sounds odd to most people today, but he was deadly serious. Is it possible that today’s Christianity is fundamentally different from the teachings of the apostles? Some scholars and serious students of the Bible have recognized and acknowledged that the practices of the early Church varied greatly from those of today.

Norbert Brox, professor of early church history at the University of Regensburg, Germany, described the context and perspective of the early Church in these terms: “Thus the first [Christian] communities were groups that formed within Judaism... Christians believed as before in the God of Israel: their Bible was the Bible of the Jews... They continued to observe (as Jesus did) the Jewish practice of temple worship and law (Acts 2.46; 10.14), and gave outsiders the impression of being a Jewish sect (Acts 24.5, 14; 28.22), not a new religion. They themselves probably also simply thought of themselves as Jews” (A Concise History of the Early Church, 1996, p. 4).

This is what we see in the Bible as recorded in the book of Acts and the letters of the apostles. But things would change dramatically, as we see in the state of the Church in the second century. Historian Jesse Hurlbut says of this time of transformation: “We name the last generation of the first century, from 68 to 100 A.D., ‘The Age of Shadows,’ partly because the gloom of persecution was over the church, but more especially because of all the periods in the [church’s] history, it is the one about which we know the least. We have no longer the clear light of the Book of Acts to guide us; and no author of that age has filled the blank in the history...”

“For fifty years after St. Paul’s life a curtain hangs over the church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church fathers, we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul” (The Story of the Christian Church, 1970, p. 33). How did this transformation in the practices of Christianity come about?

Major shifts in Christianity

Only a few decades after Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, some who presented themselves as faithful ministers of Christ began to introduce heretical teachings. The apostle Paul described such men and their methods: “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness...” (2 Corinthians 11:13-15, emphasis added throughout).

These teachers appeared to represent Christ at a time when the masses of humanity lacked any significant education. To the unschooled believers of that time, their teachings probably seemed reasonable and even sounded right. Yet these teachers were really instruments of deception in Satan’s hands, used to lead others astray. Many may not have even realized their own errors and misguided motives.

Over time the damage was done. The apostle John, apparently the last survivor among the 12 original disciples, wrote of one false minister who had risen to power within the Church. This man was openly rejecting John’s emissaries and excommunicating faithful members (3 John 9-10). This is a shocking example of how bad conditions had become in the Church as the first century drew to a close.

With John’s writings, the books and letters that would form the New Testament were complete. With his passing, however, reliable eyewitness accounts of events and changes in the Church largely ceased. We are left with confusing and contradictory accounts for the next several centuries.

Persecution leads to changes

Part of the lack of information about this time stems from persecution against the Church. Under Emperor Nero (A.D.
Jesus’ Warnings of Abandonment of Truth

Jesus Christ forewarned that men would change His teachings. He was right. Is it possible that Christianity was radically transformed in its earliest centuries? Surprising as it may seem, both Jesus Christ and the apostles warned of changes that would come in the Church. Were these empty warnings, or did Christ foretell a subtle yet deadly threat to the religion that bears His name?

Notice the ominous tone of His warnings to His followers: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

He explained: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (verses 21-23).

Jesus knew that some would feign obedience to His teachings, but their actions would reveal their motives. “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?” He asked them (Luke 6:46).

How would this be possible? Shortly before His death, Jesus described to His disciples the trends that would begin in the near future and culminate before His yet-future return to earth. He warned of false teachers who would “rise up and deceive many” (Matthew 24:11). Many of these would claim to come in His name and to represent Him (verse 5), yet they would teach a different message. Many would fall prey to their deceptive teachings, Christ warned. Notice that the deception would center on His person. They would rightly say Jesus was the Christ, yet deceive many. The issue turns on obedience to Christ (Luke 6:46). Worshiping Jesus Christ should always be accompanied by keeping the commandments of God. These deceptive trends would include “false christs and false prophets [who] will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:24). So great will be their beguiling powers and teachings, said Jesus, that even those firmly grounded in biblical truth would be in danger of being led astray.

Did this great work of deception begin in the Church as Jesus prophesied? Yes, it did. The apostle Paul issued this sad prediction to the leaders of the congregation in Ephesus: “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:29-30).

Echoing Jesus’ warnings about those who would distort His words to teach lawlessness—disobedience to the instructions in God’s law—Paul observed that “the mystery of lawlessness [rejection of God’s laws] is already at work” (2 Thessalonians 2:7) and will continue until Christ puts an end to it at His return (verse 8).

The apostle Peter also warned of this deceitful influence at work in the early Church. “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction” (2 Peter 2:1).

In the same way the apostle John cautioned the brethren in the Church, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Considering these warnings and statements, we would do well to examine the roots of Christianity and see whether these trends did, in fact, influence those calling themselves Christian—and possibly what you believe!
and most other churches” (Brox, p. 124).

At Nicaea the new custom of Easter won out over the biblical Passover. The Roman emperor Constantine decreed that those who refused to follow the Roman church’s lead were heretics and to be excommunicated. His resulting letter showed the depth of his feelings regarding practices he considered “Jewish.”

“It appeared an unworthy thing,” he wrote, “that in the celebration of this most holy feast [Easter] we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul . . . Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd: for we have received from our Savior a different way . . .

“Strive and pray continually that the purity of your soul may not seem in anything to be sullied by fellowship with the custom of these most wicked men . . . All should unite in desiring that which sound reason appears to demand, avoiding all participation in the perjured conduct of the Jews” (Eusebius, Life of Constantine 3, 18-19, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1979, second series, Vol. 1, pp. 524-525).

Constantine endorses ‘Christianity’

Constantine’s reign as emperor (306-337) dramatically changed the direction Christianity would take. Under his rule, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and he was baptized (albeit on his deathbed).

But what was the nature of the Christianity he endorsed?

By now, much had already changed. Charles Guignebert, professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Paris, observes: “Contemplate the Christian Church at the beginning of the fourth century, therefore, and some difficulty will be experienced in recognizing in her the community of Apostolic times, or rather, we shall not be able to recognize it at all . . .” (The Early History of Christianity, 1927, p. 122).

Consider also the noted British historian Paul Johnson’s conclusions regarding Constantine: “He himself appears to have been a sun-worshipper, one of a number of late-pagan cults which had observances in common with the Christians. Thus the followers of Isis adored a madonna nursing her holy child; the cult of Attis and Cybele celebrated a day of blood and fasting, followed by the Hilaria resurrection-feast, a day of joy, on 25 March; the elitist Mithraics, many of whom were senior army officers, ate a sacred meal. Constantine was almost certainly a Mithraic, and his triumphal arch, built after his ‘conversion’, testifies to the Sun-god, or ‘unconquered sun’.

“Many Christians did not make a clear distinction between this sun-cult and their own. They referred to Christ ‘driving his chariot across the sky’: they held their services on Sunday, knelt towards the East and had their nativity-feast on 25 December, the birthday of the sun at the winter solstice. During the later pagan revival under the Emperor Julian many Christians found it easy to apostasize because of this confusion; . . . Constantine never abandoned sun-worship and kept the sun on his coins . . .

“[Constantine] no doubt shared the view, popular among professional soldiers, that all religious cults should be respected, to appease their respective gods . . . Many of his ecclesiastical arrangements indicate that he wanted a state Church, with the clergy as civil servants. His own role was not wholly removed from that of the pagan God-emperor—as witness the colossal heads and statues of himself with which he littered his empire—though he preferred the idea of a priest-king.

“How could the Christian Church, apparently quite willingly, accommodate this weird megalomaniac in its theocratic system? Was there a conscious bargain? Which side benefited most from this unseemly marriage between Church and State? Or, to put it another way, did the empire surrender to Christianity, or did Christianity prostitute itself to the empire?” (A History of Christianity, 1976, pp. 67-69).

This is a remarkable admission in light of the fact that the apostle John, as recorded in Revelation 17, saw in a prophetic vision a woman representing a great false church acting as prostitute with the world’s kings (to learn more, see “Is the Protestant Reformation Being Undone?” beginning on page 4).

From Sabbath to Sunday

Constantine’s affection for sun worship led him to formalize a change in the weekly day of rest for Christianity. “In 321 Constantine introduced Sunday as a weekly day of rest for the society which he had Christianized as part of his religious policy, and on it no work was done . . . The rest from work on the Christian Sunday was derived from the Jewish sabbath
What Did the Early Church Believe and Practice?

The book of Acts is an eyewitness account of the early Church from Christ’s death until about A.D. 60. Chapter 2 records the beginning of the Church, when God sent His Spirit to 120 followers of Jesus Christ. Many Bible readers are familiar with the miraculous events of that day—of the place they were assembled filling with the sound of a mighty wind and what appeared to be tongues of fire alighting on those gathered. Another miracle occurred as those people, now filled with God’s Spirit, began to speak in the languages of people from many lands so that all could understand their words.

Often overlooked in this account is the day on which these events occurred, Pentecost (Acts 2:1), one of the festivals God commanded for His people many centuries before (Leviticus 23). In revealing these festivals, God said, “These are My feasts . . . the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations” (verses 2, 4). God proclaimed observance of these festivals to be “a statute forever throughout your generations” (verses 14, 21, 31, 41).

The Gospels show that Jesus Christ observed the same festivals (Matthew 26:17-19; John 7:10-14, 37-38). Both the book of Acts and Paul’s letters show the apostles keeping these festivals during the decades after Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection (Acts 2:1-4; 18:21; 20:6, 16; 27:9).

Most churches teach that the festivals were “nailed to the cross,” somehow annulled by Christ’s death. Yet the unmistakable record of the Bible is that the early Church continued to observe them, but with greater grasp of their spiritual significance.

Speaking of one of these God-given feasts, the apostle Paul urged the church in Corinth—a mixed group of gentile and Jewish believers—to “keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:8). Paul was clearly referring to the Feast of Unleavened Bread (see Leviticus 23:6; Deuteronomy 16:16).

Paul explained the significance of the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7; Leviticus 23:5) and gave instructions to these gentle and Jewish believers on how to properly observe this ceremony (1 Corinthians 11:23-28).

The many references in the Gospels, Acts and Paul’s epistles prompt an obvious question: Since Jesus, the apostles and the early Church—Jew and gentile alike—kept these days, why don’t churches teach and observe them today? After all, Paul directly tied the feasts to Jesus, His purpose and His sacrifice for mankind (1 Corinthians 5:7). (To learn more about these festivals, read “Why Does Christianity Reject Christ’s Own Holy Days?” beginning on page 23.)

The Gospels and the book of Acts are equally clear that Christ, the disciples and the early Church kept the weekly Sabbath—sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, the seventh day of the week—as their day of rest and worship (Mark 6:2; Luke 4:31-32; 13:10; Acts 13:14-44; 18:4). Jesus even called Himself “Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28).

It was Jesus’ custom to go to the synagogue on Sabbath days to worship (Luke 4:16). Contrary to the teaching of those who say that Paul abandoned the Sabbath, it was his custom, too, to go to the synagogue every Sabbath (Acts 17:1-3), using the opportunity to teach others about Jesus Christ.

The weekly Sabbath is another of God’s festivals, like those mentioned earlier. It is, in fact, the first of His feasts listed (Leviticus 23:1-4). It is included in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

As with God’s other festivals, the Sabbath is ignored by the overwhelming majority of churches. Rather than keeping the Sabbath as God commanded, most churches meet on the first day of the week—Sunday—a day nowhere commanded in the Bible as a day of worship. Why? If we are to observe any day as a weekly day of rest and worship, shouldn’t it be the same day Jesus Christ and the apostles kept? (Be sure to request or download our free study guide Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest to learn more.)

We also find other differences in teaching and practice. Many churches teach that obedience to God’s law is unnecessary, that Christ kept it for us or it was “nailed to the cross” with Christ. This is directly contrary to Jesus’ own words (Matthew 4:4; 5:17-19) and the teaching and practice of the apostles.

Shall we look at some of the major differences between the Christianity of the time of Christ and the apostles and that commonly practiced today. Shouldn’t you look into your Bible to see if your beliefs and practices square with what Jesus Christ and the apostles practiced and taught?

Following Christ’s example, the apostles powerfully preached about Jesus Christ’s return to establish the coming Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 21:27, 31; Acts 1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23, 31). But Paul warned that, even in his day, some were already preaching “a different gospel” (2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6).

We see much confusion in churches about what the gospel is. Most view it as a mes-
commandment, with which Sunday intrinsically had no connection . . . So the present-day Sunday ultimately arises . . . through the state legislation of late antiquity” (Brox, p. 105).

For a time some in what was now a largely transformed Christianity continued to observe the Sabbath and other festivals kept by Jesus and the apostles. This was not to last. Says Robin Fox, lecturer in ancient history at Oxford University, “In the 430s, the Christian Council of Laodicea ruled in detail against Christian observance of the Jewish Sabbath, their acceptance of unleavened bread from Jews and their keeping of Jewish festivals” (Pagans and Christians, 1987, p. 482).

**Transformed by paganism**

While the practices of the apostles were being banned, traditions from other religions were being incorporated and relabeled as Christian. Writes historian John Romer:

“Subtly, so subtly that the bishops themselves had not seen them, the old gods had entered their churches like the air of the Mediterranean. And they live still in Christian ritual, in the iconography and the festivals of Christianity . . . The ancient sign of life, the *ankh*, which the gods had carried in their sculptures for thousands of years, was easily transformed into the Christian cross; the figure of Isis nursing her child Horus, *Isis Lactans*, became the figure of the Virgin with Jesus at her breast . . .

“At Rome, Romulus and Remus were swapped for the biblical saints Peter and Paul. And still in the fifth century, the Pope had to stop the early morning congregation of St Peter’s from walking up the church steps backwards so as not to offend Sol, the rising sun god.

“Similarly, 25 December, now Christ’s birthday, was also the day of Sol Invictus [the unconquered sun’s] festival . . . celebrated by cutting green branches and hanging little lights on them, and presents were given out in the god’s name. Sol’s weekly festival Sol-day—Sunday—became the Christian Sabbath . . .” (Testament: The Bible and History, 1988, pp. 230-231).

To expand the universal church’s power and influence, its leadership welcomed many new converts—and many new practices—into the church. Professor Guignebert describes this process: “Now at the beginning of the fifth century, the ignorant and the semi-Christians thronged into the Church in numbers . . . They had forgotten none of their pagan customs . . . The bishops of that period had to content themselves with redressing, as best they could, and in experimental fashion, the shocking malformations of the Christian faith which they perceived around them . . .

“[Properly instructing converts] was out of the question; they had to be content with teaching them no more than the symbol of baptism and then baptizing them en masse, postponing until a later date the task of eradicating their superstitions, which they preserved intact . . . This ‘later date’ never arrived, and the Church adapted to herself, as well as she could, them and their customs and beliefs. On their side, they were content to dress their paganism in a Christian cloak” (p. 208-210).

Guignebert describes the resulting bizarre synthesis that now formed Christianity: “The ancient festivals [are now] kept as holidays and celebrated in the country parts, and the Church can only neutralize their effect by turning them to account for her own profit. There is nothing stranger, from this point of view, than the instructions given by [Pope] Gregory the Great to the monk Augustine, his missionary to England. “He is to transform the temples into churches, after they have been ceremonially cleansed; and to replace the devil-sacrifices by processions in honor of some saint, with an offering of oxen to the glory of God, and the distribution of the flesh among the congregation. Moreover, the king of East Anglia, Redwald, after his baptism and Christian confession, is careful to keep opposite the altar in his church at which mass is celebrated, another altar where the sacrifices demanded by the ancient gods are carried out” (p. 214).

Guignebert also observes, “It is sometimes very difficult to tell exactly from which pagan rite a particular Christian rite is derived, but it remains certain that the spirit of pagan ritualism became by degrees impressed upon Christianity, to such an extent that at last the whole of it might be found distributed through its ceremonies” (p. 121).

**What does God say?**

During these early centuries, Christianity was radically transformed. The leaders of the most highly visible form of Christianity—the Roman Catholic Church, now supported by the power of the state—ignored God’s instruction and substituted one pagan practice after another, even as they persecuted those who still held to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

They disregarded God when He warned: “Take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them [the pagan nations], after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way . . . Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deuteronomy 12:30-32).

The apostles understood God’s instruction and steadfastly resisted the kind of changes that later infiltrated the Church. After all, this instruction was part of “the Holy Scriptures,” the only Bible they had at the time (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Although many blatantly non-Christian practices were toned down in later centuries, even cursory research into many popular practices reveals their roots.

But what is equally regrettable is that, by abandoning the practices of Jesus and the apostles, so many are missing out on a fuller understanding of true Christianity.

Rest assured, there are still Christians who faithfully follow the practices and teachings of Jesus and the apostles who enjoy the blessing of discerning God’s great plan for men and women everywhere. They have discovered the “narrow” way of life that few find (Matthew 7:14). And with God’s help, you can find it too!
October 2017 marks a significant milestone in world religion—the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Yet a much more important bibli-cally mandated occasion comes early in the month, as it falls around this time of year every year. And every year Protestantism sadly fails to acknowledge it and the need to observe it. This occasion commemorates something that happened nearly 3,500 years ago as well as something much bigger that is yet to come. The reference is to the Feast of Tabernacles, which the whole world will be required to observe when Jesus Christ returns to the earth to rule all nations! (Zechariah 14:16-19).

In fact, in that world to come all people will also celebrate and worship on God’s seventh-day Sabbath (Isaiah 56:1-8; 66:23) rather than on the first day of the week, Sunday. And they will observe all seven of the annual feasts or festivals that God revealed to ancient Israel in Leviticus 23!

So why is it that most churchgoers have never heard these things? Why don’t today’s churches teach them? Shouldn’t Christians derive their practice from the Bible?

A quick biblical overview

God had commanded ancient Israel to participate in these periods of special worship during the harvest seasons of the year (Exodus 23:14-16; Deuteronomy 16:1-17). Later scriptural teaching reveals that the physical harvests of crops symbolized the spiritual harvests of human beings in God’s plan of salvation through Jesus Christ (Matthew 9:37-38; John 4:35; John 15:1-8; Colossians 2:16-17). The first three annual festivals are associated with the spring harvests in the land of Israel, while the last four festivals are related to the harvest of late summer and fall.

The New Testament shows that the first-century Christian Church continued to observe these biblical festivals. Jesus Himself observed them, and we as His followers are told to walk as He walked (John 7:8-14; 1 John 2:6)—to live as He lived. The New Testament Church miraculously began on one of these annual festivals—the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). And the apostles and disciples of the early Church continued to observe these festivals long after Jesus’ death and resurrection (Acts 18:21; Acts 20:16; Acts 27:9; 1 Corinthians 5:8).

Through the observance of these feasts, God’s people focus on and are reminded throughout the year of the work of Jesus Christ in fulfilling God’s plan of salvation. And like the early Church, we must continue in them!

God’s festivals rejected, replaced and ignored by the Reformation

So what happened? Over time, apostasy—a falling away from God’s truth—set in and grew. Eventually those who continued in the teachings and practices of Christ and His apostles became a small minority among those who identified themselves as Christian (see “What Happened to the Beliefs of the Early Church?” beginning on page 18). Many false teachings became attached to Christianity, and new days of worship were instituted, most of pagan origin—weekly Sunday...
observance and the annual holidays of Christmas and Easter being chief among these.

Even the true gospel message about Christ’s literal future return to rule all nations in the Kingdom of God was altered into a message about the Kingdom existing in the hearts of believers and Christ’s rule being established through the church—the church becoming centered at Rome and coming to dominate the ancient empire and various world powers ever since. Yet this was the great apostate church—not the relatively small true Church that continued in biblical teaching!

In time, and in protest against much corruption and false teachings and practices in the Roman church, came the Protestant Reformation, which had the intent of returning to the Christian faith of the New Testament. In some ways it succeeded in restoring biblical concepts, yet it continued in much Roman Christian ideology and even introduced new problems. For all the talk of following Scripture alone, it certainly did not return to the faith and practice of the early Christians.

From the early Reformation period came a set of principles foundational to Protestant teaching on salvation (in contrast to Catholic teaching) known as the five solas of salvation: sola scriptura (“scripture alone”), sola fide (“faith alone”), sola gratia (“grace alone”), sola Christo (“Christ alone”), and sola sempiternitatem (“eternal life alone”). Thus the Bible only was to be the rule of faith—not tradition and Roman church decrees. And salvation was understood to come through grace by faith in Christ for atonement with no requirement of righteous deeds or additional pious acts imposed by the Roman church.

Two solas were added later that also expressed earlier Protestant teaching: solo Christo (“by Christ alone”), rejecting the need for a special priesthood class and any other mediator but Christ, and soli Deo gloria (“glory to God alone”), rejecting the veneration of Mary, saints and angels.

Despite many changes, there was no return to biblical days of worship.

**Faith and grace must be with obedience**

Regrettably, the excessive focus on faith alone and grace alone had the shameful consequence of rejecting biblical law in general as part of the process of justification or being made right before God. The epistle of James had explicitly stated that “a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone” (James 2:24, emphasis added throughout)—for which reason Martin Luther wanted this book removed from the Bible.

And even the apostle Paul, the supposed proponent of rejecting the law, stated that “not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified” (Romans 2:13). However, it is true that Paul also said, “We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28). Yet there is no contradiction here. We must realize that two stages of justification are being spoken about.

A person is initially justified or made right with God every time He sincerely repents (turns from sin and commits to obeying God) while having faith in Christ’s atoning sacrifice—before any actual works of obedience. But a person remains justified by following through on the commitment in continuing obedience with Christ’s help. Sinning thereafter then requires new repentance to be justified or made right, along with continued obedience to remain justified.

It is vital that we continue in obedience to scriptural instructions, including the observance of God’s festivals. Paul himself continued to observe these festivals as a Christian, presenting them as continuing “shadows” or outlines of the great events in God’s plan of salvation yet to be fulfilled (Colossians 2:16–17). He even told the gentile (non-Israelite) congregation in Corinth regarding one of the festivals, “Let us keep the feast” (1 Corinthians 5:8)—referring to the biblical Feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6).

**Claiming “Scripture alone” and “Christ alone”—while disobeying both Scripture and Christ**

It’s sadly ironic that the Protestant faith, with its 800 to 900 million adherents today, stands for “Scripture alone” and “Christ alone” while observing worship days and holidays from non-biblical pagan tradition—when the Bible specifically commands not to do that (Deuteronomy 12:29–32).

At the same time the Protestant faith tells its followers not to observe the days that Scripture says we are to keep, days that Christ Himself gave as the God who interacted with human beings in the Old Testament period (John 1:1–3, 14; John 8:58; 1 Corinthians 10:4) and kept as a man in the New Testament!

How did this disconnect come about? It arose in part from a serious anti-Jewish outlook among the Protestant Reformers—following a long-ingrained attitude against Jewish practice in the Roman church (again, see “What Happened to the Beliefs of the Early Church?” beginning on page 18).

The festivals given by God in the Old Testament were looked on as Jewish ritual that was supposed to have ended with Christ’s death—and continuing in them was seen as Judaizing legalism. Yet God said these were His feasts (Leviticus 23:1–2). And they all together represent the steps in God’s plan of salvation for all humanity—not just the Jewish people—through Jesus Christ. Indeed, the work of Christ is a central focus of every one of these observances. And the work is still ongoing.

Doesn’t it make a great deal more sense that standing for Scripture alone and Christ alone should include observances of God’s commanded biblical festivals that focus deeply on the saving work of Jesus Christ rather than celebrating repackaged holidays of pagan origin with only superficially invented connections to Christ’s story? Certainly!

In fact, a proper biblical understanding of faith and grace also demands the observance of these biblical festivals as part of trusting in God’s Word and receiving His gifts, as these occasions assuredly are. And, yes, it is all to God’s glory!

**Overview of the biblical feasts—the steps in God’s plan to save mankind through Jesus Christ**

Let’s look more, then, into these biblical festivals listed in Leviticus 23 and take note of the role of Jesus Christ in their meaning and fulfillment. More details about each can be found in our free study guide God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind.

**The Passover,** in early spring in the northern hemisphere, was observed by the Israelites with a sacrificed lamb—recalling the blood of the sacrificed lamb in Egypt applied to the lintels and doorposts of Israelite homes to spare them from the plague
that killed the Egyptian firstborn (Exodus 12; Leviticus 23:4-5).

This festival teaches us that Jesus Christ was sinless and, as the sacrificial "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," gave His life so that the sins of humanity could be forgiven and the death penalty removed, commencing with the redemption of the firstborn of humanity, God’s Church today (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:18-20; Romans 3:25; Hebrews 12:23).

The New Testament observance of this festival includes footwashing and the partaking of unleavened bread and wine as symbolic of Christ’s body and shed blood offered in sacrifice, following His instruction and example (John 13:12-17; Matthew 26:17-30; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-31).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, starting the day after Passover and continuing for seven days, recalls the Israelite Exodus from Egypt and crossing of the Red Sea, being freed from captivity and the sinful life there (Exodus 12-14; Leviticus 23:6-8).

This biblical festival teaches us that Jesus Christ leads us to reject lawlessness, repent of sin and live by every word of God (1 Corinthians 5:8; Matthew 4:4). It was during this festival that Jesus was dead and buried for three days and nights and then rose from the dead. We are to be figuratively buried and raised with Him into new life, as pictured by baptism (Romans 6)—imagery also seen in the Red Sea crossing (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

During this festival, leaven—an agent such as yeast that causes bread dough to rise during baking—symbols sin and is therefore removed from our homes and not eaten for the seven days (1 Corinthians 5:7-8; Exodus 12:19). By eating unleavened bread during this time instead, we picture partaking of the true Bread of life, Jesus Christ (John 6:35, 48-51), and thereby living a sinless life of sincerity and truth— the risen Christ living in us.

The Feast of Pentecost is a one-day festival that falls in late spring in the northern hemisphere (Leviticus 23:15-22). Also called the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of Harvest or Firstfruits, it teaches us that Jesus Christ is now building His Church, comprising those who are a "kind of firstfruits" in the spiritual harvest of mankind, having the "firstfruits of the Spirit" (Exodus 23:16; Acts 2:1-4; Acts 2:37-39; James 1:18; Romans 8:23).

Besides its harvest aspect, Pentecost recalls the time of God’s speaking of the Ten Commandments to Israel at Mount Sinai. This is also when the Holy Spirit, which empowers us to continue in obedience to the law, was given to the New Testament Church in Acts 2.

God’s spiritual firstfruits, true Christians of this age, will be given salvation at the return of Christ. They have been given the Holy Spirit, which creates in each one a new heart and nature to live in wholehearted obedience to the commandments of God. Jesus Himself is the first of the firstfruits, as formerly pictured in a special firstfruits offering during the previous festival (see Leviticus 23:9-14; 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). Pentecost, Greek for “fiftieth,” is the 50th day counting from that initial offering of the wave sheaf during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The Feast of Trumpets, a Holy Day in late summer or early fall in the northern hemisphere, was to memorialize a loud blaring (Leviticus 23:23-25), probably the sound of the ram’s horn when God—in the person of the Being who was later born in the flesh as Jesus Christ—came down onto Mount Sinai in a great display of power and then spoke the commandments (Exodus 19-20).

This festival teaches us that Jesus Christ will return to the earth at the end of this age in power and glory—again preceded by the sound of trumpet blasts. Seven angels with seven trumpets are described in Revelation 8-10 heralding world-shaking events. Christ will return with the blowing of the seventh trumpet (Revelation 11:15)—the last trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:52).

At the last trumpet Christ will again come down to proclaim God’s law—not just to Israel but to all humanity. At that time He will resurrect God’s faithful servants who are no longer living and instantly change those obedient saints who are still alive into immortal spirit beings (Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52-53; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

The Day of Atonement, a Holy Day following shortly after the previous one, was during the time of Israel’s tabernacle and temple the occasion for a special ceremony involving two goats—one representing Jesus Christ that was sacrificed and the other symbolizing something else, this goat being banished alive into the desert (Leviticus 16; 23:26-33).

This points to the time when Jesus Christ at His return will send a mighty angel to bind Satan the devil away for
required to observe this festival (Zechariah 14:16-19). As we saw at the outset, Scripture explicitly states that all nations will be gathered throughout the world. Church members are to live in temporary dwellings during that time. While this reminds us of earthly dwelling will still be temporary, albeit the grandest ever—awaiting the permanence of the new heavens and new earth still to come (Revelation 21-22). As we saw at the outset, Scripture explicitly states that all nations will be required to observe this festival (Zechariah 14:16-19).

The Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Feast of Ingathering, comes a few days after the previous Holy Day and lasts for seven days (Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Leviticus 23:33-44). Besides celebrating the great harvest at the end of the agricultural year, this festival was also originally intended to commemorate the Israelites dwelling in temporary structures of branches when they left Egypt (verses 40-43).

This feast teaches us that when Jesus Christ returns, He will begin the ingathering or harvest of the part of mankind still alive at His return, and establish a new society with Himself as King of Kings and Lord of Lords under God the Father.

Jesus, assisted by the resurrected saints, will set up His government on the earth for 1,000 years, a period often called the Millennium (Revelation 19:11-16; Revelation 20:4; Leviticus 23:39-43; Matthew 17:1-4; Hebrews 11:8-9). Rule under His laws will spread from Jerusalem throughout the world to usher in an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity (Isaiah 2:2-4; Daniel 2:35; Daniel 2:44; Daniel 7:13-14). This was part of the good news of the Kingdom of God that Jesus and His disciples proclaimed—including how we may enter and be part of that great Kingdom.

The Feast of Tabernacles is observed today through regional gatherings throughout the world. Church members are to live in temporary dwellings during that time. While this reminds us that life today is fleeting, it also symbolizes the Millennium, when earthly dwelling will still be temporary, albeit the grandest ever—awaiting the permanence of the new heavens and new earth still to come (Revelation 21-22). As we saw at the outset, Scripture explicitly states that all nations will be required to observe this festival (Zechariah 14:16-19).

The Eighth Day, the Holy Day immediately following the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:36, 39), continues with many of the themes of the Feast of Tabernacles but is an independent feast.

This day teaches us that Jesus Christ will complete His harvest of human beings by raising from the dead, and offering salvation to, all who have died in the past and have never been given a full opportunity to be saved (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 11:25-27; Luke 11:31-32; Revelation 20:11-13). In the last reference here, Jesus is the One pictured sitting on the great white throne in judgment—for the Father has committed all judgment to the Son (John 5:22-23, 27).

Thus, the annual cycle of the celebration of the festivals and Holy Days of the Bible reminds Christ’s disciples that He is working out God’s plan of offering salvation from sin and death and the gift of eternal life in the family of God to all humanity—past, present and future.

Why do the major branches of traditional Christianity reject these observances that focus on the saving work of Christ? Because they are steeped in false tradition and misunderstanding. This includes those of the Protestant faith who proclaim Scripture alone and Christ alone. For by these principles they should not be observing holidays derived from paganism, but the only festivals actually commanded in Scripture—holidays kept in response to Israel’s sin with the golden calf and mediated a renewal of the Sinai covenant (Exodus 34). This may be a parallel with Jesus’ second coming as the Mediator of the New Covenant, with the law to now be written on tablets of the heart of the Israelites and all people—as it is now being written on the hearts of true Christians by the Holy Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3:3; Hebrews 10:15-17).

Those who proclaim Scripture alone and Christ alone should not be observing holidays derived from paganism, but the festivals commanded in Scripture!
On July 4 this year North Korea launched an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of carrying a nuclear weapon as far as Alaska. Some experts said the missile had the capability of reaching as far as the U.S. mainland and the city of San Francisco.

The timing of the launch was not by coincidence. July 4 is the annual celebration of America’s birth. The day is a symbol of the gift of freedom gained through the struggle for independence and the founders setting up the nation’s government, all by God’s blessings. It also focuses on American national strength, which has served not just the country but the world at large. North Korea was giving notice it was setting sights on America.

In fact, North Korean leaders “warmly congratulated the national defence science soldiers on striking the US imperialists on the face,” according to the North Korean news agency KCNA. They also stated that if “US imperialists commit even the slightest military provocation,” the North Korean military would “show to the world how the territory of the US will be reduced to ashes” (Agence France-Presse, “Explosions in Sky as Pyongyang Celebrates ICBM Launch,” July 6, 2017).

This news brings obvious concerns. A nuclear-armed North Korea is without question a menace. But I’m not scared, and neither should you be. I know there’s a God who has a purpose and plan for this world. Bible prophecy tells me that though there will be devastating wars, probably even nuclear wars, human life will not be annihilated.

Bible prophecy explains why our world is dangerous. It also provides hope, which removes fear. Let’s look at what’s happening, and let’s understand why.

Steps toward the worst time ever

North Korea picked the day it did to show America it had within its reach the ability to inflict great destruction on the American people. This grave danger posed by a regime that has...
proven its disregard for human life—starving and repressing its own citizens in building its nuclear program—comes at a time when America is being torn apart with political debate over the presidential election process and health care reform.

The ability of the president to effectively govern is challenged by media-hyped allegations of collusion with Russia in the 2016 election process. The cloud of doubt cast over government threatened to paralyze and distract the nation’s leaders from focusing on the real peril posed by nations that wish to remove American power and end its long-established world role.

The threat is real. The consequences are far-reaching.

In His last major prophecy before His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus Christ spoke of a time of world turmoil and upheaval that will create war, tension and trouble beyond any seen in any previous period of history. It will be a time of “great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21). This will create conditions that, if not cut short, would cause the extinction of all life (verse 22).

These verses describe a time made possible by the creation of deadly nuclear weapons at the end and in the aftermath of World War II. Since then the world has been under the threat of massive destruction unlike any period of world history.

Treaties, arms agreements and goodwill have not deterred the spread of nuclear weapons to countries that would use them to advance their national and religious interests. North Korea threatens to use its nuclear weapon against America. Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons and threatens to launch them against the state of Israel. Should Saudi Arabia obtain a weapon, an already unstable Middle East would be at dagger points. The world is at the point of massive destabilization on the issue of nuclear weapons alone.

There is one common thread to this scenario—the desire of certain nations to remove America’s historic role as a world superpower. Let’s look closer at what is happening.

The Asian calculus

The United States has hoped that China would be a broker in persuading North Korea to stand down from its nuclear ambitions. This is a false hope. China has propped up the Kim regime since the time of the Korean War. It is in China’s interests to keep Korea divided and South Korea without nuclear weapons.

The last thing China wants is a united Korea on the Korean peninsula, armed with nuclear weapons and aligned with America. Such a situation is a threat to Chinese desires to control all of Asia. Nor is a nuclear-armed Japan something China wants. More nuclear nations in Asia would create a level of instability likely to drag other nations like Russia and America into regional conflicts. China’s leaders supporting a rogue nuclear-armed North Korea fits their long-range plan.

China is pursuing a steady course to become the dominant power in Asia, replacing America. It’s building a naval power capable of controlling the vital sea lanes of the region. It will soon be capable of threatening the U.S. Navy, which has guaranteed open sea lanes and the movement of ship-borne cargoes. Freedom of the seas is vital to a stable global economy.

China has also been pushing claims to small islands in the South China Sea. These islands, some of which are claimed by Japan, would give China further ability to control the seas.

Against rulings by the World Court, China has continued to pursue its territorial goals. Its desire to cut down American influence in the Pacific Rim remains. Whatever happens with North Korea, America cannot expect Chinese support that would undermine China’s long-term strategic interest—the removal of American influence in Asia.

America relying on China is like the book of Hosea’s description of ancient Israel flitting like a “silly dove, without sense,” to foreign nations in seeking alliances (Hosea 7:11).

At that time neither Assyrian nor Egyptian national interests were aligned with Israel’s. Israel’s sins and internal problems were draining its strength and national character. Because of spiritual sin the leaders and people could not see that they were weakened. They did not seek God in their lives and had pushed Him to the margins (verses 8-12). Decline was inevitable, and their fall soon came. Is America today in the same situation?

Russia and the Middle East

Much was made of the more than two-hour meeting of President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the annual G20 Summit in Hamburg, Germany, in July. President Trump’s 2016 campaign is under scrutiny for alleged collusion with Russia to influence election results. The question of Russian meddling in American politics continues to undermine confidence in the Trump administration, hinder passing legislation, and puts America in a weakened and compromised position internationally.

All of this works to Russian advantage. Russia has supported the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war. Russia has built an air base in Syria and is working to plant its influence in the region as a counter to the United States. For America to rely on Russia to support its interests in the region is a folly. Russia wants influence in the Middle East. Destabilizing the current scene works to its advantage.
Another major part of the Middle East puzzle is Iran. It is building a Shiite arc of influence from Iran through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Using its own forces, the disruptive effect of ISIS, and its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon, it is extending its power and influencing events.

The Iranian Revolution continues. Its aim is the defeat and removal of the Great Satan, America. Iran has also vowed to wipe the state of Israel from the map as part of its desire to create a Shiite caliphate in the region. America stands in its way and therefore must be removed by any means possible.

A deeply divided America

In the same passage from Hosea 7 quoted above, Israel is described as having its strength devoured and gray hairs on its head (verse 9). Yet the nation could not perceive that its weakness was so deep and severe that collapse was near. It’s time to consider the gray hairs, devoured strength and decline of the United States.

The current political and social divide in the nation is deep, serious and dangerous. It has been developing for several years. The current phase can be traced back to the presidential election of 2000. The election that year between George W. Bush and Al Gore was so close, hanging on vote counts in several Florida counties, that it had to be decided by the U.S. Supreme Court. The court ruled in favor of Mr. Bush. Cries of “foul!” rose from those who supported the defeated Mr. Gore, and a great national debate ensued. President Bush began his term under a cloud.

Jesus Christ spoke of a time of world turmoil and upheaval that will create war, tension and trouble beyond any seen in any previous period of history.

Then came Sept. 11, 2001, the attack on America that began the war on terror. The next month America and its allies invaded Afghanistan and quickly overthrew the Taliban. In 2003 America invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein. Soon the protracted wars became deeply unpopular. While winning the wars, America couldn’t win the peace.

The end result of the Iraq War was a destabilized region, which led to the rise of ISIS. The uprisings in other Middle East nations in the so-called “Arab Spring” of 2010 led to further instability and is at the heart of the current Syrian civil war. The financial crisis of 2008 had further undermined American confidence.

Eight years of President Barack Obama further deepened the social turmoil in America. A national health care law was passed without bipartisan support from Congress. The hostility generated by that act contributed to the erosion of the national debate and is still defining current political relations. Mr. Obama, the nation’s first black president, came into office amid great hope and expectation. He left with many former supporters disappointed and the nation much further in debt and in decline in the international arena.

The election of Donald Trump came at a time of failed leadership at many levels. Mr. Trump defeated 15 others who sought the presidency. The bitter campaigning deepened the national divide with each week. On election night a great many pundits and people around the world were stunned by the results.

Sadly, America lacks visionary leadership. The current scene has grown to open hostility, some calling it class warfare. There is always hope for improvement, but the long-term prospects don’t look promising. Meanwhile the international situation is growing more troublesome almost by the day.

America is crippled domestically at one of the gravest moments in history. The historic alignment of the powerful nations is changing. From Asia to the Middle East and Europe, we are seeing a shaking and overturning of nations and their relations to one another. Always in history this has been a signal of major shifts in world affairs. And those who are wise will seek to understand the times in the light of the Bible and its prophecies of where events are headed.

The only way to understand what’s taking place

Long ago, in the world of the ancient Middle East, God told His prophet Habakkuk that He was shaking the nations according to His plan: “Look around at the nations; look and be amazed! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn’t believe even if someone told you about it” (Habakkuk 1:5–6, New Living Translation).

God did overturn the nations of Habakkuk’s time. Those events changed that world, and the effect is still with us today. God is in ultimate control of history. History moves at the speed of the plan of God!

We are in another such time of world upheaval. The only way to understand this is through the keys of Bible prophecy. That God is the God of history is a key that helps calm the waters of fear and uncertainty. It’s why I noted earlier that I am not frightened by current world events, disturbing and startling though they are, and neither should you be.

But to be clear, we are in time of serious and increasing trouble. Now is the time for a wise person to turn to God seeking a relationship that comforts and encourages. The best advice you could hear right now is to turn down your connection to the news and turn up your connection to God!

After Habakkuk surveyed the events of his day and understood the judgment of God that would soon turn the world upside down, he was able to take comfort in his relationship with God, saying: “I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign Lord is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights” (Habakkuk 3:18-19).

You too can have that kind of faithful assurance from God—but it must start by turning to Him with all of your heart and being!

LEARN MORE

Wouldn’t you like to know more about where our world is headed and why? To understand more of the keys to unlocking the meaning of Bible prophecy, download or request our study guide You Can Understand Bible Prophecy. A free copy is waiting for you!

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North Korea problem not going away

North Korea capable of and willing to use nuclear weapons is the stuff of nightmares for, at the very least, South Korea and its allies in the West. Even if we disregard the potential for long-range nuclear strikes on targets like the United States or Europe, the existential threat to South Korea’s densely populated capital, Seoul, cannot be ignored. Seoul sits just 35 miles from North Korea’s southern border and 121 miles from North Korea’s capital, Pyongyang. The potential for destruction on such a massive scale is unthinkable for everyone but North Korea’s leaders—with supreme leader Kim Jong-un refusing to back down from establishing his nation as an elite nuclear power able to strike not only regional targets but long-range enemies as well.


Seoul’s citizens in particular feel the heat of potential conflict, facing down a belligerent state that, in addition to its nuclear arsenal, is also armed with chemical weapons. The time for diplomacy and sanctions may be past, as an ever-increasingly well-equipped North Korea seems unlikely to turn from its stated path toward what it feels will be greater fearsome prestige among the nations—potentially leading to direct conflict with the United States and its allies. The cost of such an outcome, especially for those in South Korea and its regional neighbors, is unimaginable. (Source: National Review.)

What’s behind Russian tension with NATO?

Increased tension between Russia and NATO alliance members was kick-started by Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea, a then-Ukrainian territory. Following the military intervention and subsequent annexation, the United Nations issued a resolution declaring Russia’s takeover illegal.

Since then Russia’s already complex relationship with Europe and the United States has cooled even further after disagreements over intervention in the Syrian civil war and allegations of Russian tampering in the U.S. presidential election.

The recent behavior of Russia has been so troubling that its nearest neighbors are on high alert. An article from the Jamestown Foundation, a global research institute that specializes in Eurasian geopolitics, speculates that Russia may pose a future risk to Europe’s poorest nation, Moldova.

“Moldova is a landlocked country, but unbeknownst to many, it has an international port on the Danube that is accessible to seagoing vessels. The Port of Giurgiulești (some 130 kilometers [81 miles] from the Black Sea) presents large economic opportunities as well as significant security vulnerabilities . . . Despite its strategic economic value, the port presents growing security vulnerabilities for Moldova. Following the annexation of Crimea, the security situation in the Black Sea region changed dramatically” (Mihai Popsoi, “How Vulnerable Is Moldova to a Russian Invasion Through Its Only Port?” July 31, 2017).

That sovereign European nations should even be concerned about the fidelity of their borders is cause for serious concern about the stability of Europe. Russia was instrumental in setting the world scene for the two World Wars and the Cold War in the 20th century, and President Vladimir Putin seems set on reestablishing Russia as a major disruptive force on the world stage. (Source: The Jamestown Foundation.)

Legality changes opinions on morality

Two years after the [U.S.] Supreme Court decision that required states to recognize same-sex marriages nationwide, support for allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally is at its highest point in over 20 years of Pew Research Center polling on the issue” (“Support for Same-Sex Marriage Grows, Even Among Groups That Had Been Skeptical,” Pew Research Center, June 26, 2017).

Support for same-sex marriage has increased dramatically since the ruling. The research noted above has shown increasing support over the last few decades, but a notable jump after the Supreme Court decision. People began to change their views on the morality of same-sex marriage.

“By a margin of nearly two-to-one (62% to 32%), more Americans now say they favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry than say they are opposed” (ibid.).

Legality changes opinions. We have seen it in the past. After the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling, public opinion shifted on the morality of abortion. Today you can hear comedians minimize abortions as a mere bodily discharge. That’s a far leap from the controversial court case all those years ago.

What the courts decide has a massive impact on what citizens decide is moral. This is especially dangerous with God being taken out of the picture more and more.

We teach children right from wrong and to avoid what is unsafe: Don’t play near the street. Don’t play with the electrical outlets. We recognize the danger because we have had the experience and the knowledge to understand the consequences of these things. A child’s limited perspective often hinders making the right choice.

The pride of man is now rejecting God and His eternal wisdom. The pride of man is determining that we can decide what is best and that we can know of ourselves all that’s needed for making correct decisions.

We need to recognize that a court ruling cannot dictate morality by God’s standards—especially when the courts have rejected the legitimacy of God. Take heed in the coming years, as more evil will be ruled good. Make sure your moral compass is directed by the Word of God. (Source: The Pew Research Center.)
What are smartphones doing to our kids—and to all of us?

The availability of the smartphone has changed the way we live. It’s so handy to have phone, e-mail, calendars, messaging, voice recorders, maps, music, camera and the Internet all in one place and available at any given time. The convenience can’t be beat. We can look up anything at any time.

A host of new studies have been coming out revealing the impacts smartphones are having on our lives—especially the lives of young people who have only known a world where smartphones and tablets exist.

A recent article in The Atlantic goes into detail about the effects of smartphones on the emerging generation—not the millennials, but the generation after them. “More comfortable online than out partying, post-Millennials are safer, physically, on the emerging generation—not the millennials, but the generation after them.”

Smartphones and the Internet are relatively new for all of us. Social media and the ability to see what all of our friends are doing at any moment of the day is also a new experience. What is this ubiquitous connection doing to our teens who know only this kind of world?

“Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy. There’s not a single exception. All screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness.”

“Psychologically . . . they are more vulnerable than Millennials were: Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It’s not an exaggeration to describe [the generation born between 1995-2012] as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades.”

Having this knowledge should make us mindful of the grave dangers to our children and how much both they and we are connected and “plugged in.” There are psychological ramifications for all of us if we don’t keep the consuming power of our phones in check. (Source: The Atlantic, Focus on the Family website.)

A heinous ruling in Pakistan

Reuters recently reported on a shocking incident in Pakistan. “Pakistani police have arrested 25 members of an informal village council accused of ordering the rape of a 16-year-old girl as revenge for her brother’s alleged sexual assault of another girl” (Asif Shahzad, “Pakistani Council Orders ‘Revenge Rape’ of 16-Year-Old Girl,” July 27, 2017). As horrifying as this story is, it’s not the first time this has happened in Pakistan. Revenge rape has been in the news before. “Earlier . . . [in July], a local council in the southern city of Multan was called after a family accused a 16-year-old boy of raping a 13-year-old neighbor” (ibid.).

These decisions are not coming directly from the Pakistani government, but from local tribal elders. “Pakistan has a centuries-old tradition of quick justice handed down by gatherings of local elders, known as jirgas or panchayats, seen by many villagers as preferable to the oft-cumbersome and corrupt formal legal system” (ibid.). The case came to light when both families filed criminal charges with police accusing the other family’s son of rape.

We read in the Bible about “perilous times” in the last days before the return of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 3:1-2). Sometimes, it seems far off in our Western comfortable lifestyles, but news like this slaps us with the reality of the world we live in.

What have we become when the way to right a sin is to commit another sin? What is the sense in, rather than punishing the rapist, calling for another rape of an innocent person—creating both a new perpetrator and victim?!

In Isaiah 59:9 we read: “Therefore justice is far from us, nor does righteousness abide in the gates.”

This is a stark reminder of the need for the Kingdom of God. May God speed that day. (Source: Reuters.)

Ten Commandments takedown underscores America’s identity crisis

What role does religion play in the public sphere? Does America’s Christian heritage hold any lasting influence? How do public officials balance personal faith and civic duty? Such questions are points of conflict in the United States—as many Christians seek to reaffirm faith’s role in the nation, while many secularists attempt to remove religion from public life altogether.

The great moral code underlying biblical morality, the Ten Commandments, remains at the center of the debate. The removal of Ten Commandments monuments has made news before, but a different sort of removal made headlines recently. “Freedom!” cried the man as he drove his car into a six-foot monument of the Ten Commandments in Little Rock, Arkansas, toppling the sculpture from its base and shattering it to pieces. From where Michael Tate Reed II sat, behind the wheel of a Dodge Dart, the destruction of the Ten Commandments in the summer of 2017 was an act of liberation designed to free the nation from the tyranny of religion.

“This wasn’t the first time that Reed had dislodged the Decalogue from its pedestal. Several years earlier, in 2014, he had rammed his car into a Ten Commandments monument in Oklahoma City, but not too many people had taken note. This time around, Reed made sure they did by streaming his violent act live on Facebook” (Jenna Joselit, “Breaking the Ten Commandments: A Short History of the Contentious American Monuments,” Religion and Politics, Aug. 1, 2017).

America’s culture war rages on, and religion will continue to play a central role. Reed’s open acts of violence against Ten Commandments monuments show the lengths to which some will go to undermine the Christian religious and cultural heritage the majority of Americans share. (Source: Religion and Politics.)

How can you make sense of the news?

So much is happening in the world, and so quickly. Where are today’s dramatic and dangerous trends taking us? What does Bible prophecy reveal about our future? You’re probably very concerned with the direction the world is heading. So are we. That’s one reason we produce the Beyond Today daily TV commentaries—to help you understand the news in the light of Bible prophecy. These eye-opening presentations offer you a perspective so badly needed in our confused world—the perspective of God’s Word. Visit us at ucg.org/beyond-today/daily.
After our recent move to live in Africa, I’ve come to see that at times the heart of a country’s problems lie in the hearts of its leaders. Yet a time is coming when leaders will not have corrupt hearts.

by Lena VanAusdle

In December of 2016 my husband and I packed up all of our belongings, put most of them in storage, and moved everything else to a small country in southern Africa.

We were both born and raised in the United States, but we had traveled some, and we were excited about the possibilities this move represented. I watched as our plane flew over mile after mile, my attention focused on every minute detail—rivers racing down the mountains, occasional gray rock faces rising dramatically out of dense green forests spilling down the mountains, seamlessly transitioning to field after field of maize (unsweet white corn that, ground, serves as the staple food in this region).

These fields or forests were periodically interrupted by circles of bright red dirt dotted with thatched or tin roofs, marking tiny villages. I had never imagined that this is the course my life would take, nor that we would be living in such a beautiful place.

As the minutes ticked into hours while we flew above this gorgeous landscape over several countries, I slowly realized something seemed to be missing. Or, rather, in my experience there seemed to be something missing—roads, the paved ones at least.

In those several hours I had seen only one or two paved roads. I also hadn’t seen a city below me in quite some time. I was, in flying back home, accustomed to city running into city with brief farmlands turning into more city or mountain or forest, with one constant—roads. There are always paved roads. This was going to be a very different experience. It’s exciting to see God’s creation unspoiled by manmade intervention.

However, this unspoiled beauty is not by design. It’s all too often the result of greed. It seems funny to say this. The destruction of God’s creation is so often the result of human greed, but so, it seems, is the complete lack of development.

God designed a beautiful and abundant world, perfect for human occupation, and He gave us charge over it. In Genesis 2:15 we read that “the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.” The word “tend” is a translation of the Hebrew word abad, which can also mean “help” or “cultivate.”

Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition, defines cultivate as “to improve by labor, care, or study.” The word translated “keep” in this verse is shamar, which also means to “observe” or “guard.” God told man from the beginning that it is our duty to cultivate and guard the earth. We should use it, but not misuse it. God designed the world specifically for human beings, and for an incredible future.

The warm heart of Africa

Malawi, the country where we currently live, is called the warm heart of Africa, and that’s so fitting. The people you meet are kind and generous. The country itself and its neighbors Zambia, Mozambique and Tanzania are beautiful but also some of the poorest countries in the world (depending on the measure used).

So why are they so poor? Why is there so much suffering? Do they lack resources? Is it a lack of foreign investment? No. The main reason for the suffering in these countries is corruption and greed, and it affects every aspect of life—just as God said it would when He inspired the prophet Isaiah to write, “The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways” (Isaiah 59:8).

In Malawi there is a serious electrical power problem. The power company, ESCOM, is owned by the government. It creates power through a dam system on Lake Malawi and several rivers, along with a few areas of solar power generation.

The company schedules “load shedding” periodically throughout the country to decrease the demand on the system. Theoretically the load shedding keeps any one area from losing power more often than others. What it actually does is gives the company control over who gets access to power and when. Most areas lose power at least once a day, ranging from a few minutes to multiple hours.

Notice I said most areas. Some areas lose power for days on end. These tend to be the poorer areas, with poorly built or...
badly maintained infrastructure. But some areas never lose power—the richer areas where resident Westerners live, where government officials live, where rich executives live.

What this means is that the poor get poorer. Many small businesses (Internet cafes, welding shops, small markets) have folded due to a lack of electricity. They can’t make money when their equipment sits idle in the dark. While these accounts are anecdotal—what I have personally observed and been informed about—the continuing problem with electrical power is well documented.

In 2016 when Malawians complained about ongoing power outages, they were informed that the recent severe drought caused water levels to drop in Lake Malawi and the Shire River (where most of the power generation occurs), and therefore there was less capacity to generate electricity. As the rainy season (November-April) continued into 2017 and the rivers swelled to flood stages, and the lake level rose to pre-drought levels, the power outages dragged on—this time because debris from the rains had clogged the hydropower units.

**Temporary gains lead to chronic problems**

It might be easy to excuse the lack of electricity as due to a lack of resources. However, nearly 40 percent of all public funds in Malawi are provided through foreign aid. In the last few years it’s been uncovered that 1.3 billion Malawian kwacha (about U.S. $1.8 million) have been pilfered from ESCOM.

Sadly, it’s not just the power company that is blighted with scandal. In 2013 it was uncovered that between 200 and 500 billion kwacha (around $3-7 million) were stolen from the Malawian government.

The most recent scandal to hit Malawi has been dubbed “Maizegate.” The department of agriculture mismanaged 9.5 billion kwacha ($13 million), impacting people's access to grain for food and for planting later this year.

There are so many biblical concepts that would prevent all of these injustices, but I’d like to focus on just the principle of cultivating and keeping the land as God commanded in Genesis 2:15, mentioned earlier.

These companies aren’t taking their ill-gotten gains and updating the existing infrastructure to produce more energy. They aren’t investing in new technology to improve this situation. They’re not investing in the future. Instead they line their pockets.

Even worse, rather than invest in the country’s most valuable asset—their people—for an even greater return in productivity and creativity, these leaders and government officials fail to see the big picture and lie, cheat and steal for temporary gains.

While these specific cases happened in Malawi, corruption is endemic around the world. Malawi isn’t even in the top 50 in this regard. No country is immune. José Ugaz, chairman of Transparency International, puts it quite succinctly: “In too many countries, people are deprived of their most basic needs and go to bed hungry every night because of corruption, while the powerful and corrupt enjoy lavish lifestyles with impunity.”

**God the Father and Jesus Christ always see the big picture**

One of the beautiful things about God and His love for mankind is His focus on the future. This is also, oftentimes, one of the most confusing things about our relationship with God. Why? Because while God wants to bless us physically (see Deuteronomy 28:12; Malachi 3:10; John 10:10), He is much more concerned about our *long-term, spiritual* condition.

His ultimate goal is for all of mankind (those who will follow Him) to inherit eternal life. Yet sometimes what’s best for us to attain that goal might include suffering. But it’s always temporary, it’s always for our good, and it’s always an investment in our future.

When Jesus Christ returns to rule over the earth, all people—but especially the poor and needy of this world—will finally be rescued. As Isaiah 35:10 describes it: “The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Under the reign of Jesus Christ and His perfected followers from this age (see Daniel 7:18; Luke 19:11-27; Revelation 5:10; 20:4, 6), government corruption will become a thing of the past. Hurt and destruction will end, with everyone coming to know God and being directly led in His ways (Isaiah 11:9; 30:20-21).

Jesus Christ will become “a refuge for the oppressed” (Psalm 9:9). Further, “He will bring justice to the poor of the people; He will save the children of the needy” (Psalm 72:4).

God the Father and Jesus Christ want to see all human beings live up to their full potential (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9) and become heirs with Jesus Christ of eternal life (Romans 8:17).

This means that everyone will be given the opportunity to live an abundant life, not just the elites. “Everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid” (Micah 4:4).

The farms of that time will produce abundant harvests. “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13).

Again, God’s coming perfect government will protect the rights of those who work to enjoy the fruits of their labors. And everyone, not just the rich or those who work in government, will have the opportunity to prosper!

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**LEARN MORE**

Many Bible prophecies tell us of a very different world to come. How will the world be transformed at the return of Jesus Christ? Download or request our study guide *The Gospel of the Kingdom* to learn more. A free copy is waiting for you!

BTmagazine.org/booklets
Three Gardens With One Purpose—Now the Next Stop

We looked last time at man's beginning with God in a garden. Though expelled, man's future also awaits in a garden with God. This time, we focus on a garden experience that bridges the divide.

by Robin Webber

In the last "Follow Me" column (July-August issue) we embarked on a journey of exploring how Scripture is framed in bookend fashion by two unique but connected garden-like experiences. Both the Garden of Eden in the Genesis account and the city of God from heaven at the end of Revelation are fundamental to understanding the seamless purposes of God.

The divine declaration in Genesis 1:26, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Genesis 1:26), was but the beginning of the creative process. The ultimate conclusion of “bringing many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10) is a spiritual creation that is still in the making. That is, God is simply not through! Not with humanity as a whole or you personally! There’s so much more to God’s creative intent than what is shared in the initial Genesis account.

Both garden settings have three common features—the presence of God, the presence of the tree of life, and the presence of those made in God’s image and likeness. But there are other features absent from the garden setting of Revelation 22 that were mentioned in the Garden of Eden experience. To understand this, it’s essential that on our journey we visit the second garden—one in the middle.

What occurred here is effectively the “glue,” or should I say “heart,” that unites these gardens of Scripture. It’s here that the One who interacted with Adam and Eve in the first garden, the Word who became Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:1-4, 14), directs us, “Follow Me”—welcoming us into this garden setting to experience with Him the most intimate moments of His human experience. It’s here that we linger and explore the ultimate “heart-set” of this Son of God, this Son of Man, as framed by the forever words, “Not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

A place to clear the heart

We are invited through Scripture to enter this garden on the last night of Jesus’ human life. Our visit commences after His conclusion of “bringing many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10)—a familiar gathering spot for the Master and His disciples (John 18:2), several hundred yards outside the city across the Kidron Valley at the foot of the Mount of Olives. It’s reasonable to surmise how often Jesus’ entourage enjoyed the shade of the olive trees as they would journey on this natural route from Bethany across the Mount of Olives to the temple.

It’s here with one sweeping view that Jesus could gaze up westward toward the Temple Mount, the site of so many sacrifices, and then gaze upward eastward to the Mount of Olives, from where He would shortly ascend to heaven (Acts 1:9-12) and to where He will, as foretold, one day return to rescue humanity (Zechariah 14:3-4).

It’s here between the place of sacrifice and the site of future glory that Christ comes in the cool of night to huddle with His Father. He needed precious alone time with the One with whom He had shared eternity, because before the sun would set again He would be nailed to a wooden beam and die for you and me. Indeed, the hour had come! There was one more task on earth that needed accomplishing—one more teaching that would have to be taught by personal example to those who would heed His call of “Follow Me.” Before one bears a crown, one has to bear a cross (Luke 14:27).

The choice between two trees remains

What would be accomplished here stands in stark contrast to the first garden. Adam, along with his wife Eve, rejected God’s grace and commandment and were removed from Eden and the presence of God—because they gave in to their own will and desires against what God had said.

Eve was enamored with a tree that was “good for food . . . pleasant to the eyes, and . . . desirable to make one wise” (Genesis 3:6). She listened to the serpent too long and stuck around until it was too late. She bit into his lies that forsaking God’s specific instructions to not partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil wouldn’t have consequences. She totally swallowed the line that “you will not surely die” but “you will be like God” (verses 4-5). She became dead wrong, and her husband was one bite behind.

Thousands of years later the Spirit of God would inspire the apostle John to present a spiritual yardstick to measure the fruit of this tree. Note what John wrote in 1 John 2:15-17, with parallels from Genesis 3:6 in brackets:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone
loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh ['good for food'], the lust of the eyes ['pleasant to the eyes'], and the pride of life ['you will be like God']—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever."

The first human couple succumbed to the lure of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil rather than, in faith, embrace the tree of life (Genesis 2:9). While Eden is gone, the low-lying fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil still tempts humanity—be it the Son of Man when walking on this earth or us today. Will we continue to reach for it to take a bite?

**Sacrifice not an event but a way of life**

Jesus as “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45) made a different choice in the Garden of Gethsemane. He would not sacrifice God’s trust in Him, but sacrificed Himself without reservation. His desire to follow the Father’s will above His own was not merely an event but a way of life He had persevered in. The gateway into this garden, in terms of what it represented, was not only just now unlocked in the shade of olive trees, but had effectively been opened a few years before in the heat of the Judean desert.

It’s in that desert wilderness that the devil (the serpent) came at our Savior with the fruit of the forbidden tree (see Matthew 4:1-11). He spoke to Jesus’ hunger from fasting, appealing to the lust of the flesh, by beguiling Him in vain to turn rocks into bread.

The devil tried to lead Jesus down the lane of the pride of life by urging Him to jump from the pinnacle of the temple to prove who He was. Satan strove to overwhelm and blur our Savior’s vision and bend Him to the lust of the eyes by offering Him a virtual tour of the kingdoms of this world and their glory.

Jesus won every time even as the devil strove to sucker punch Him with a string of “ifs” regarding His status as God’s dear Son. Solely pressed as the Son of Man in a hostile wilderness condition but ever fortified as the Son of God, Jesus concluded the wilderness experience with a “spiritual GPS” that would ultimately direct Him, step by step, to Golgotha: “For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve’” (Matthew 4:10).

But now this God-centered “heart-set” is transferred and fixed in time into the setting of this middle garden. It’s here that Jesus is confronted with the great decision of whether to live in the moment or consider eternity with His Father and ultimately with us. It’s here that He must, through the Holy Spirit, override the longings of His flesh to fulfill the words of Isaiah 53:5-6: “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, . . . and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

He fully comprehends what is to happen as He departs this spot. Early in His ministry, He had stated that He would be “lifted up,” referring to His crucifixion (John 3:14). And like His fellow Jews of that day, He would have seen the agony and degradation endured by those who were crucified. Is it any wonder that, as Matthew 26:37-38 records, He was “deeply distressed” and “exceedingly sorrowful”?

**“Abba, Father”—always there, always cares**

It’s here in this garden that Jesus comes to pour out His heart three different times in prayer (Matthew 26:39, 42, 44) to the only One who can provide Him strength, wisdom and encouragement to move through this final leg of earthly existence. It’s here that He communes with the only One who is alerted to His inner trauma even as His earthly companions sleep just a stone’s throw away.

It’s here that we hear Jesus agonizingly request “that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him” (Mark 14:35). And humanly He means it! But in the next breath, He addresses God with the Aramaic term “Abba”—Dear Father (verse 36)—speaking to God not merely as a sovereign entity, but as a Father who is near and going through the experience with Him. The intimate relational bond is deep and will hold as Jesus prays again: “. . . Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will” (verse 36).

It’s here in this middle garden that Jesus declares that no matter what comes, He embraces the tree of life—and that His life will be given so that the forbidden tree with its curse will never take root in the future garden of God’s city in Revelation.

Within hours the second Adam will die—but not apart from God’s presence, as the first Adam died. Christ truly is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). And He has led us to this garden spot of absolute surrender of personal agendas so often based on temporary gain versus long-term gain towards our Heavenly Father and those He brings into our lives.

Next time, we will take Jesus at His word when He said, “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2), as He asks us to “follow Me” into the third garden—the City of God described in Revelation 22.

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**LEARN MORE**

What is the significance of Jesus Christ’s suffering and sacrifice? What is its part in God’s plan? What should it mean to you? Download or request our free study guide Jesus Christ: The Real Story to understand the biblical truth!

[BTmagazine.org/booklets](http://BTmagazine.org/booklets)
“Seven Prophetic End-Time Markers”

This was a great article that needs to be read and studied by everyone. After reading this, I am now doing Bible study on end-time prophecy and informing myself of current world events. I recently learned of this church and have been reading your material more. I enjoy it and feel as though I’ve become closer to God through your church’s teachings.

Subscriber in Ohio

Excellent article. Well organized, and the timeline flows in a succinct and easy-to-understand manner. Thank you for investing the time, prayer and study to complete it.

From the Internet

“How to Make the World Great Again”

I am incarcerated. A friend allowed me to read his May/June 2017 Beyond Today issue. I am hooked. Please start my permanent subscription immediately. I was glued to the article “How to Make the World Great Again.” The story, wisdom and truth in that article is so true, brutally honest and well written. I plan on making copies of that story and circulating it to my fellow believers, and non-believers as well. Thank you for your time, attention and understanding in this matter of absolute interest to me and others.

Reader in Connecticut

Grateful for Beyond Today

My subscription has expired and I truly miss it. No, I really need it. It is so inspiring and thought-provoking. I need to rethink my life from time to time, and Beyond Today helps me to do so in many different ways. Please send me a subscription to your periodical again.

Subscriber in Connecticut

Your magazine is helpful for understanding how the world is changing, and how to look for the time when Christ will return. Thanks for your wonderful magazines.

Subscriber in Nicaragua

I am a native man of almost 70 years of age from one of the long-houses in the interior of Borneo, East Malaysia. I have been reading your magazine for many years now, and I thank you all so very much for your kindness. I believe that what the United Church of God preaches is the truth based on the Word of God. Sadly there is no church of yours here in our area, or state as a whole. Sometimes I try to share articles from your magazine with my friends in our church, but some of them do not seem to appreciate it. Very sad indeed.

Subscriber in Malaysia

Thank you so much for your wonderful magazine. It is so educational, and you answer so many of the questions I’ve wondered about for years. Your explanations are very easy to understand. Keep up the good work. The current world desperately needs spiritual help. Thank you so much.

Subscriber in Australia

Sending donations in thanks

We are senior citizens on a fixed income. I send donations as often as I can. This one is more than I am usually able to send. A couple of weeks ago God blessed us so much that I cut some other things to be able to send you a bigger donation as a way to praise and thank Him. God truly does work miracles and we feel very blessed. I love your booklets, magazine and TV programs. Thank you for your ministry.

Thankful readers

I am benefiting very much from the detailed information and analysis your magazine and other booklets. When God blesses me with some financial resources, I will send my donation for the benefit of spreading the good news.

Reader in Zimbabwe

“Seven Prophetic End-Time Markers”

...continued

We are grateful for the donations. We will put them all to spreading the gospel of God’s Kingdom as far and wide as we can!

Searching for congregation

I really enjoy and have learned a lot from Beyond Today magazine. Your magazines teach me so much about the Bible and give me more understanding about politics and religion around the world. I was given this magazine by a friend. Would you help me find a United Church of God congregation in my area? Thank you so much.

Reader in Maryland

This is the first church I have come across that actually makes sense to me and answers my questions and concerns about the Bible truthfully. The Bible teaches, as does your church, that assembly is a very important part of showing love toward God and becoming like Jesus. I feel that would be an impossible task to fulfill through a web page or attending church through a webinar. I yearn and long for a church to call “my own.”

Reader in Texas

We have congregations around the world where believers meet to learn from the Scriptures and worship God together. You can find out if there is one near you by visiting ucg.org/congregations. Please find one, visit, reach out to the pastor and engage with us!

I have just completed the 12-lesson Bible Study Course and found it very satisfying. I have also read several of your booklets and find them very absorbing. Could you also advise me of the nearest minister, his name and phone number? I look forward to receiving your magazine, and I wonder why the traditional Christian churches did not reintroduce God’s annual and weekly Sabbaths correctly at the Reformation. I wish you every success in your good work.

Subscriber in Queensland, Australia

Thank you for your interest, and we have forwarded the contact information for our closest pastor. As for your question about God’s Sabbaths and Holy Days with regard to traditional Christianity, several of the articles in this issue address that topic. We hope you find them helpful.

Published letters may be edited for clarity and space. Address your letters to Beyond Today, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A., or e-mail BTinfo@ucg.org (please be sure to include your full name, city, state or province, and country).
Q: Does the Bible teach the doctrine of “once saved, always saved”? Can it be proven from Scripture?

A: Some people believe that when a person commits his or her life to Jesus Christ, accepting Him as personal Savior, then eternal salvation is totally assured from that moment on, with absolutely no possibility of ever losing it. This is often referred to as “eternal security” or “once saved, always saved.” But does the Bible really teach this? Let’s examine the Scriptures to understand the truth.

Those who teach or hold to this belief use several scriptures to try to prove it. Let’s look at one passage that is often misunderstood this way, and then see many verses that show this to be an erroneous conclusion.

John 10:27-29 is a pivotal passage used for this teaching: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand.”

Jesus made this statement in response to some who had questioned Him as to whether He was the promised Messiah (John 10:23-24). The focus here was not “eternal security” but the recognition of His identity as Messiah.

He declared that His true followers, drawn to Him by the Father, followed Him as the One through whom they would receive eternal life. They thus recognized Him as the Messiah, and no one could shake them from their God-given conviction. His answer, then, was effectively that people couldn’t properly understand His identity and follow Him without the Father leading them to Him (compare John 6:44).

The verbs “hear” and “follow” are in the present tense in the Greek, so Jesus was speaking of the present and not specifically about the future. In stating that “no one is able to snatch them [the sheep] out of My Father’s hand,” He meant that no external power (be it Satan, false religious leaders or anyone else) could take them away. Jesus definitely did not say that His followers couldn’t ultimately fail due to fault of their own. Other verses clearly show it is possible to be once enlightened and then fail to continue in the path of righteousness.

Other scriptures used to establish the “once saved, always saved” doctrine follow the same pattern of being misinterpreted and misapplied. Just one clear scripture that contradicts this teaching is enough to show that the teaching is not biblical. Yet in fact, we can find many passages that teach just the opposite of this doctrine, showing that one must meet—and continue to meet—certain conditions to receiving God’s gift of salvation.

We are assured that God will never leave us or forsake us as Christians (Hebrews 13:5). But the Bible never says it is impossible for us to leave or forsake God and lose out on His gift of salvation!

Let’s notice a few of the many scriptures proving this is possible:

• “But he who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13, emphasis added throughout).
• “By which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you; unless you believed in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:2).
• “Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation . . . ?” (Hebrews 2:1-3).
• “But Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end” (Hebrews 3:6).
• “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (Hebrews 3:14).
• “For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise” (Hebrews 10:36).
• “Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward” (2 John 1:8).
• “And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations” (Revelation 2:26).
• “Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown” (Revelation 3:11).
• “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (Hebrews 6:4-6).
• “But Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are” (Hebrews 3:1).
• “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries” (Hebrews 10:26-27).

These are just a few examples of verses that say we must continue in the faith to the very end to be saved. Notice that some verses say, “if we hold fast . . .” Salvation is conditional on our continuing to the end. Even such a figure as the apostle Paul did not say he was assured of salvation. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:27, “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

The doctrine of “eternal security” is not found in the pages of the Bible. We must all endure to the end to be saved.

On the other hand, there are many verses that show that as long as we do not through continued neglect or bitterness come to ultimately reject God, we are indeed assured of salvation. We do not need to live in worry, but can be confident in God to see us through. That is what Paul meant in Philippians 1:6: “. . . being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” We just need to stay in the process with God—to keep repenting, growing and overcoming with His help.

To learn more, be sure to read “Faith: Is It All God Requires for Salvation?” beginning on page 14.

Interested readers can also search our website on the topic of salvation for more in-depth information. Take particular note of a section of our free study guide The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God’s Law? titled “Salvation Accomplished in Stages” (within the sidebar “How Does Justification Relate to Salvation?” at ucg.org/booklets/nc).
When Discouraged, Reflect on God’s Miracles

Feeling discouraged? You might have a great source of encouragement right at hand!

by Janet Treadway

Years ago, when my oldest son David was 10, he became sick. I thought he had the flu. After a week of this, I became concerned and asked an elder in our church to anoint him and pray for God to heal him. The next day we took him to a doctor, who told us he just had the flu. “Take him home and let him rest,” the doctor said. “He will be fine.”

Before we left the office, the nurse called my husband over to the side and privately told him that he should take David to the hospital to make sure everything was okay. She felt something else was going on. Charles and I took him straight to the hospital. Alarmed, the doctors immediately took David into surgery. Apparently, David’s appendix had ruptured several days before.

David was in the hospital for a week while they drained all the toxins out of his system. To this day, we are very thankful for this quick-thinking and brave nurse, as she saved our son’s life. Had we followed the doctor’s advice and taken David home, he could easily have died.

We know to whom the ultimate thanks was due that day—God! I can name many times that God has intervened on our behalf. Some were serious and some not so serious, like the windmill answered prayer.

An unexpected blessing

Many years ago we lived in a house that had a huge windmill in the front yard. I loved that windmill, especially in the springtime when the wind would twirl the blades. The beautiful flowers that surrounded its base only enhanced its beauty. Often, early in the morning I would stare out the window while sipping on a cup of coffee. The windmill’s beauty and movement would send such peace and calm. It was a great way to start my mornings.

After years of the windmill standing tall and providing me with such joy, the paint faded, and it badly needed a paint job. It was over 10 feet tall, and with four children to feed, it was not in our budget. I just casually mentioned to our Father in heaven that I wished I had the money to paint that old windmill and bring back its beauty.

A week later, my husband glanced out the window and quickly told me to come here. He said the windmill had a fresh coat of paint on it!

Who painted our windmill and in the color that I wanted? Later that day, a young man who lived next door came over and said he painted it last night. While I should have gotten upset that a neighbor painted my windmill without permission, how could I? Strange as it was, it was a wonderful blessing. God heard my desire and inspired this young man to paint it.

Another time, we were down to hardly anything to eat. While trying to figure out how we would feed our kids that day, I heard a knock on the door. It was a woman from our church with a bag of groceries. She said she was just inspired to bring us some food. She had no idea how badly we needed the food, but God did.

Remember and be encouraged!

We all forget God’s blessings and interventions from time to time. When we get overwhelmed and discouraged with the trials we are going through, it’s good to remind ourselves of how awesome our Father in heaven is and how He has helped us all along the way in the past.

God is there to help us in the times of urgency, but He also cares for the little things that matter to us. In John 15:7 God tells us, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (New International Version).

God wants to give us the good things in life. So, do we see a loving God who wants the best for us, or do we see a harsh, uncaring God?

At your most discouraging moments, ask God to encourage you. It works! Make a list of the times He has intervened in your life. Pull it out when you get overwhelmed and review it.

If God helped you in the past, does that mean He is gone and not interested in helping you today? No! He is not fickle and gone with the wind, as you may feel some people are in your life. God is loyal and never changes (Malachi 3:6). Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

He will never leave you and commands you to be strong and courageous. Deuteronomy 31:6 states: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (NIV). Never!

God saved my son’s life. He provided desperately needed food for my family, and He even inspired someone to paint a treasured windmill for me.

What great things has God done for you? Reflect on those things! And when you are overwhelmed in a storm, always ask for encouragement!
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The World Network is available in over 200 countries, reaching viewers in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and the Americas. It reaches 86 million homes in the United States alone through DirecTV, Comcast, Time Warner Cable, Bright House Networks, Cox, Cablevision, Charter and other cable operators—and another 3 million homes on Sky TV in the United Kingdom.

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